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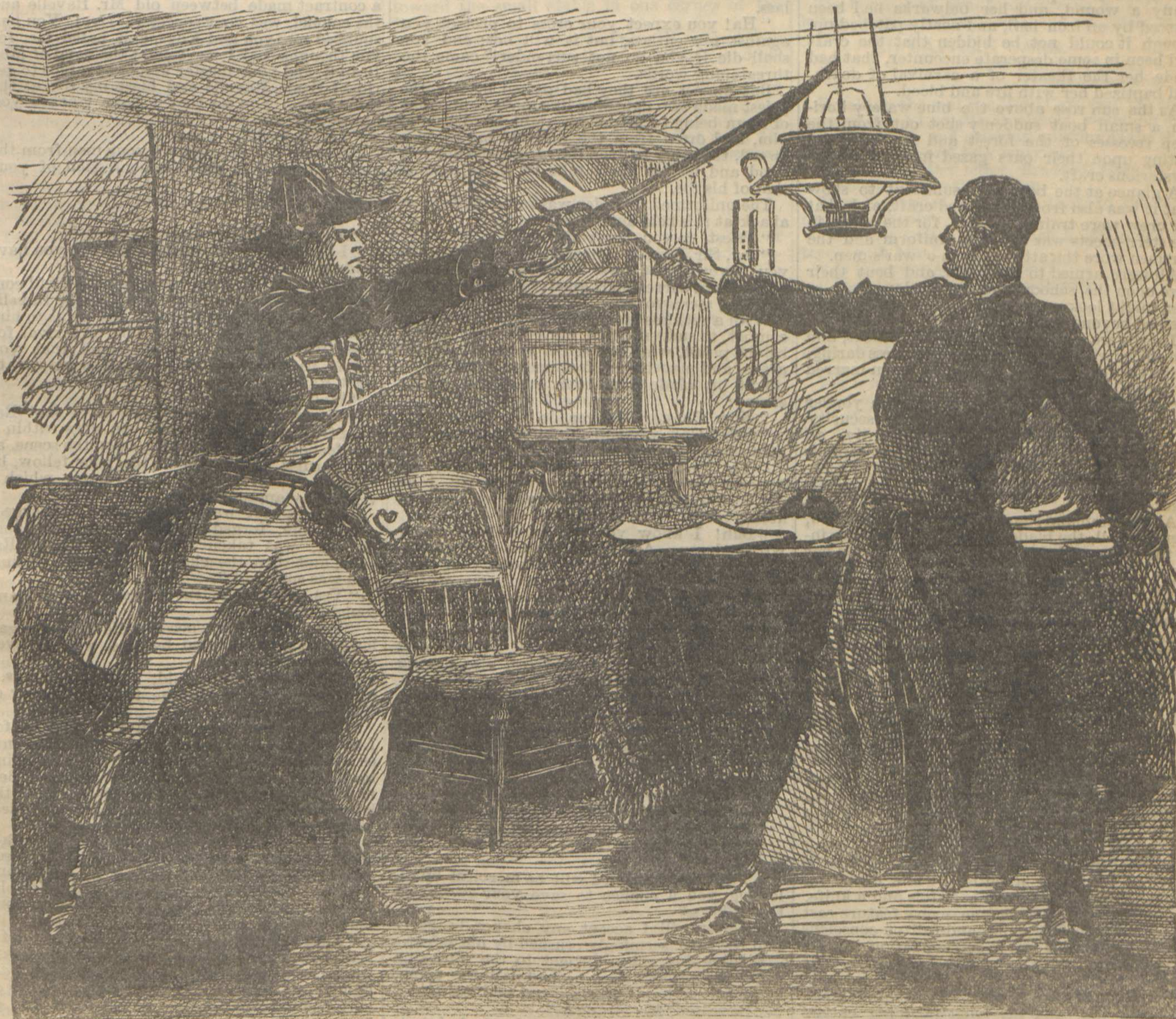
No. 259

Cutlass and Cross; or, The Ghouls of the Sea.

A COMPANION ROMANCE TO "THE PIRATE PRIEST."

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM,

AUTHOR OF "MERLE, THE MUTINEER," "MONTEZUMA, THE MERCILESS," "FREELANCE, THE BUCCANEER," "WILD BILL, THE PISTOL DEAD SHOT,"
"WILD BILL'S GOLD TRAIL," ETC., ETC.



"HA! YOU EXPECT YOUR CROSS TO PROTECT YOU AGAINST MY CUTLASS, BUT IT WILL NOT!"

Cutlass and Cross;

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CHAPTER I.

A Prologue Presenting Three Pictures.

THE FIRST PICTURE.

A SCHOONER lay at anchor in a lagoon, or inlet on the coast of Mexico, and not a human being was visible upon her decks.

The hour was between dawn and sunrise, and there was ample light to see that the craft was trimly built, rakishly rigged, and thoroughly armed, and it was a strange sight to behold her riding at anchor there, and not one soul to guard her from surprise, or protect her from attack in case foes might be near.

Beyond the point of land that formed a harbor in which she rested securely, the blue waters of the Mexican Gulf stretched away in boundless expanse, and fell in foaming curls upon the silver sands that barred its further approach inland.

Shoreward, there were dense forests, here and there penetrated by lagoons, or broken by inlets, and the scene was one of solitude, and silence, except for the trilling of the birds in their leafy retreats.

No moving object was visible, as far as the eye could reach, other than the rise and fall of the armed, crewless vessel that lay at anchor, sheltered by the earthen arm that half encircled the basin.

No flag floated at the peak of the strange craft to denote her nationality, though there was a certain look about her that would lead an honest vessel to give her a wide berth at sea.

Every rope was neatly coiled and in its place, her decks were polished, though scarred by many a wound, and her bulwarks had been pierced by an iron hail, and neatly patched up, though it could not be hidden that the craft had been in some desperate encounter, that had made her the theater of a carnival of death, and baptized her with fire and blood.

As the sun rose above the blue watery horizon, a small boat suddenly shot out from the deep recesses of the forest and the oarsmen, resting upon their oars gazed intently at the mysterious craft.

A glance at the boat was sufficient to show that it was also from an armed craft, and that her crew were trained seamen, for the officer in the stern-sheets was in naval uniform and the oarsmen wore the attire of men-o'-war's-men.

All were armed to the teeth, and bent their gaze upon the schooner-of-war as longingly as men might look upon some coveted prize they deemed beyond their reach.

They were a wild-looking set in the boat, and the officer wore an expression of reckless daring, while the features, once noble, had been marred by an evil life.

"Men, there is not a soul moving on yonder craft, for, believing wholly in their security in this place, they have evidently all turned in, so we will see if we cannot capture her," said the officer in a low tone to his men, who seemed more than willing to follow his lead.

At his command the oars, which were muffled, were let fall, the blades dropping noiselessly into the water and the boat moved swiftly on her way.

Nearer and nearer to the crewless craft it approached and still no human being was visible upon its decks, no stern hail came out over the waters to check their advance.

Nearer and nearer, until suddenly they were alongside, and with cutlass and pistol in hand the young officer led his reckless crew over the bulwarks to the deck.

Swiftly, and with a cheer upon their lips they pushed aft toward the cabin companionway, their hearts elated with triumph and believing themselves masters of the mysterious craft.

But, suddenly, out of the companionway sprang a tall form and advanced toward the boarders, whose forward movement was suddenly checked as their eyes fell upon him.

It was a man, clad in the long flowing garb of a Mexican priest, and bearing in one hand a cross, in the other a cutlass, while about his waist was a belt containing pistols and a knife.

The face was clean shaven, every feature cast in a strong, perfect mold, and full of conscious power; while in it was a determination to face those before him, no matter what the odds against him.

His manner was tragic, his elevated cross, awe-inspiring, and his long, gleaming cutlass threatening.

In a voice that rung like a trumpet he cried:

"Back from this deck, pirate dogs that you are!"

"Great God! It is the Pirate Priest! To your boats, men!"

The latter command, in thrilling tones came from the officer of the boarding-party, and the men shrunk back before the tall form that confronted them, as they might have done from some hideous monster they were powerless to oppose.

In mad haste they sprung into their boat and pulled for the nearest forest-sheltered lagoon, while, as if by magic, the schooner swarmed with men, the anchor was hauled inboard, the sails were opened and the beautiful vessel went flying seaward like some huge spirit of the deep.

THE SECOND PICTURE.

IN the cabin of an armed schooner sat the same tall, strong-faced, powerfully formed man, who, in his priestly garb, had so startled the party that had boarded his vessel when anchored in an inlet on the Mexican coast.

It was night, and the cabin lamp fell full upon him, displaying his handsome face and form distinctly, as he sat in a meditative mood, which, from its expression, led his thoughts toward themes of sadness.

Presently, steps were heard on the deck overhead, yet they failed to disturb him in his reverie, and a moment later a man descended hastily into the cabin.

The intruder was dressed in the uniform of a naval captain, and was armed with a silver-mounted cutlass, which he carried in his hand in threatening manner.

His face was that of a man who led a life of dissipation and evil, for it was sin-stamped most thoroughly, and what good it had had in it seemed to be fading under the look of recklessness he wore.

In a loud voice, as his eyes fell upon the priest, he cried:

"Ho, Sir Pirate Padre, you are my prisoner!"

With his words, he spurred forward and confronted the priest, who had risen calmly at his entrance, his manner showing no surprise at the startling intrusion and threatening words, though he held in his hand a large cross, upon which he caught the blade of his enemy's cutlass.

"Ha! you expect your cross to protect you against my cutlass, but it will not; and you shall die if you do not surrender!" came the threatening words.

But almost ere they had passed his lips, the priest made two lightning-like movements—one of them being to thrust his right hand behind him, and draw from the folds of his robes a sword, the other to drop the cross from his left hand and let his blade take its place against that of his foe.

The uniformed intruder was somewhat taken aback at this bold action, and cried:

"Priest, do you dare resist me?"

"Ay, Sir Pirate! I resist you, and will kill you, if you do not lower the weapon you hold, and at once surrender!" answered the priest, in his deep, stern voice.

With a reckless laugh, the intruder forced the combat, to suddenly find himself overmatched by the priest, who struck his cutlass from his grasp, and planting his foot upon it, said, as he thrust his blade-point over the breast of his enemy:

"Now, Chester Granger, do you surrender?"

"Great God, you call me by name!" and the man shrunk back from before his victor.

"Yes, for I know you, Chester Granger; and bitterly though you have wronged me, I do not wish to kill you, but give you a chance to atone."

"Bah! I know you not, and have never wronged you. And resistance on your part is useless, even though you have me in your power, for my men are in possession of your craft," said the other.

The priest smiled, and answered:

"You are mistaken, sir, for your men are my prisoners, as we were aware of your coming and entrapped them, your vessel also having been taken. Ho! on deck!"

At the call of the priest an officer appeared, and said, respectfully:

"Yes, Senor Padre."

"Is the vessel of this person in our possession?"

"It is, Senor Padre."

"And his crew?"

"All our prisoners, Senor Padre."

"You hear, Chester Granger?"

"I do, and I surrender," was the low response.

"You are wise, and I will be merciful by allowing you a chance to save your neck from the gallows."

"Gladly will I accept any chance," eagerly said the man, seemingly crushed by his defeat.

Bidding his officer attend to the duties on deck, the priest, when he had left the cabin, again turned to his prisoner and said, calmly:

"Be seated, Mr. Granger."

The man sunk into a seat and asked, dejectedly:

"How is it that I am known to you, for we never met before?"

"You are mistaken, for I am what I am through your act and the perfidy of another—your master," retorted the priest, bitterly.

"My master?" hotly cried the prisoner.

"Yes, your master, Barton Keys."

"Ha! you know him, too?"

"Yes, I know that he made a tool of you, and, leading you to ruin, drove you to the reckless deed of cutting out a Government vessel and turning her into a pirate."

"You have been upon my track of late, hopping, by capturing my vessel, to enrich yourself, little dreaming that I was hunting you down to wring from your lips the secret of the wrong you have done me."

"In Heaven's name who are you?"

"Do you remember last summer when a number of wealthy planters and citizens of New Orleans were passing the season at the Blue Anchor Inn on Mississippi Sound?"

"Alas! I know it but too well."

"You and Barton Keys were there among the guests of the Blue Anchor's landlord, and there was Soule Ravelle, and, among others, Colonel Brandt, his son and daughter, and the son's tutor, Bradford Carr—"

"Great God! you are Bradford Carr, the tutor," almost groaned the prisoner.

"I am."

"And you are known to the world now as the famous Pirate Priest?" and the man gazed upon his captor with strange interest.

The priest smiled and answered quietly:

"Mr. Granger, I am now known as the Pirate Priest, and I will tell you why, and both you and I are deeply interested in what will follow:

"I was a student for the priesthood when circumstances caused me to teach to support those dependent upon me. One night in Baltimore I saved the life of Colonel Brandt, and he begged me to come South with him as his son's tutor. I accepted the charge, and thus it was that, as one of his family, I became a guest of Captain Curtis, the landlord of the Blue Anchor."

"You and your master, Barton Keys, were there, and you both eagerly sought the hand of Miss Maud Brandt, and Soule Ravelle, your pretended friend, to whom she was engaged by a contract made between old Mr. Ravelle and the colonel, was your successful rival. You had snubbed me, you and Keys, and hated me, for you thought that I also sought the hand of Miss Brandt, and your master arranged a plot to get rid of Soule Ravelle and blast my life at the same time. You see that I have tracked you down, sir?"

"I do indeed!"

"And if you care to save your men from the gallows, you will make a confession of your wrong."

"You will spare me if I do?"

"Yes."

"Have you the power?"

"I will show you that I have when you have made known your plot."

"Well, relying upon your promise, I will confess that Keys and myself owed Soule Ravelle largely, and wished to cancel our debts to him by his death, while, fearing you as a rival for Miss Brandt's hand, he arranged that you should be lured to the forest in some way to meet Ravelle."

"Well, sir?"

"The plot worked well, for Keys shot Ravelle from an ambush, when you were within a few feet of him, and coming upon the scene, as you sprung to the side of the poor fellow, he accused you of being his murderer, which I verified by appearing also."

"Your pistol was found near, discharged, and a note, forged to resemble your handwriting, was taken from the body of Ravelle, and then the chain of evidence against you was sufficient."

"Yes, it was sufficient to have me tried and found guilty."

"Then I was sentenced to die upon the gallows; but I was rescued by those who believed in my innocence—"

"By pirates it was said, and thus it was, I suppose, that you became the commander of this outlaw craft?"

"You are mistaken, sir, in your surmise, for I was captured on a merchant craft, after my escape, along with some priests who were going to Mexico. My captor was the ruthless Bernardo, the buccaneer, and he spared only the holy padres, one of whom having been killed, I assumed his garb and passed as a priest."

"A witch in the West Indies had told Bernardo to carry a padre with him on his vessel, and he selected me as the one to accompany him, and thus it was that I was enabled to plot against him, execute him, and become the commander of this vessel, which was his craft."

"I am called the Pirate Priest, and yet not a law have I broken upon the sea, while I have waged war upon all ocean outlaws, and am known as I am to my Government, so that you may feel that I have the power to let you go free."

"Now, Mr. Granger, I know that Barton

Keys triumphed, drove you to ruin, and this summer is enjoying himself at the Blue Anchor Inn as the affianced of Miss Brandt, whose father has urged her to marry him. He is the murderer of Soule Ravelle, by your confession; he was the intended destroyer of myself upon the gallows; he is a gambler of the worst stripe, and seeks Miss Brandt for her fortune alone, having no pity for her, and love only for himself.

"The Blue Anchor Inn is but a few leagues from here, and thither I shall sail, with your vessel as my prize, and, while I will not make it known that you were its commander, or had become a pirate, I shall expect you to confess all that you know against Barton Keys."

"I shall do so, and it will hang him."

"Yes, and save Miss Brandt."

"Save her for you to marry," sadly said Chester Granger.

"Ah, sir, that is in the future. If I save her I shall be content; if I could win her I would be a happy man, for, loving her as I do, I cannot now enter the priesthood, especially as in the sea hunt I have had against lawless rovers, I have been forced to take human life."

"No, no, I will not look forward to the future with one single hope; but I will clear my name now of the stain upon it, and bring Barton Keys to just punishment for his crimes."

"And here is my hand that I will aid you, and, from the depths of my heart I thank you for protecting my name and my honor, for those who love me, who would hide their heads in shame, did they know I had become a pirate," and the voice of the prisoner quivered as he spoke the words and grasped the hand of the man who had been known upon the seas as the Pirate Priest.

THE THIRD PICTURE.

In a cell of a small country jail, situated upon the outskirts of a pretty village a league or more from the shores of Mississippi Sound, a man crouched down against the iron bars of the window, gazing out upon the twilight that was gradually deepening into the darkness of approaching night.

It was the very cell in which, a year before, Bradford Carr, the handsome young tutor of Irving Brandt had languished under the charge of murder.

There he had dwelt in sorrow, in gloom, and resting under a death sentence for long weary weeks, until rescued from durance vile, he had been enabled to track down his accusers and place the arch villain, Barton Keys, in the cell which he had occupied.

Clearing his own name of guilt, Bradford Carr had become a hero, while the man who had so wronged him, and the murderer of Soule Ravelle, had been quickly tried, found guilty and sentenced to die upon the very gallows erected for the one he had so nearly brought to stand under its shadows.

Torn from the society of those at the Blue Anchor Inn, dragged from the side of the beautiful girl whom he had inveigled into his web, through holding her gambling father in his power, Barton Keys had been thrust into a loathsome cell, there to await his doom.

As he crouched there in the gathering twilight, he seemed a pitiable object indeed, for his face was unshaven, his hair matted, and his face almost wild in its haggard look.

But suddenly he arose to his feet, tall, upright, superbly formed, and, as the departing rays of light fell upon his countenance, it showed a face strangely handsome, and with a nobleness that his actions of evil had belied through his life.

But thus are faces often stamped with the semblances the very opposite of what they are, and the closest readers of human nature are thrown at fault.

Suddenly a sound was heard upon the stairs, and the condemned man started, turned half-round, and muttered:

"It is the negro with my supper, and this is the fourth from the last evening meal that I will ever eat, for on the fifth day from this I must die."

"Ah! that I, Barton Keys, should come to such a death, and have all my plots foiled in almost the moment of my triumph!"

"It is horrible, the thought of dying, and not avenging myself upon those who had thwarted me."

"By Heaven! but it is death here, it is death there, on yonder hated gallows."

"Which shall it be, for I can die but once?"

"No! no! I will not die, strangled to death, but by a bullet, if death I must meet."

The man wheeled with his last words and confronted the one who had just entered, bearing a tray with edibles upon it.

It was a negro, of large, muscular build, and a face that was resolute and fearless.

With the spring of a tiger upon his prey, the desperate criminal leaped upon the negro, the tray was dashed to the floor, a knife upon it was seized in a frenzied grasp with one hand, while the victim's throat was clutched remorselessly in the other, and the two men fell heavily to the floor.

The negro possessed great strength, but he was no match for the white man, and the struggle was a short one, the latter rising to his feet with the knife in his hand ready to meet any other who would oppose his way to freedom.

A moment he stood like a tiger at bay, and then he quietly stole from the cell, walked along the corridor to the stairs, and descended with stealthy tread to the floor below.

A lamp had already been lighted there, and showed him the way to the outer door.

This he reached unseen, and, just as he was about to step outside, a whiff of tobacco smoke came into his face.

Instantly he drew back and stood silent and watchful, for the smoke told him that some one sat just outside the door, enjoying an evening pipe.

There were but few prisoners in the jail, and they were locked within their cells, the desperate prisoner well knew.

The jailer, Dick Dresden and his negro assistant, the latter lying dead in the cell above, Barton Keys was aware were the only keepers of the jail, and who could it be but the former.

Dick Dresden was known as a man of indomitable pluck, and his honesty had been well tested by those offering large bribes to escape.

Barton Keys had himself tried to bribe the keeper by a large sum to allow him to escape, but had signally failed.

He knew that Dick Dresden was a powerful man, wiry as a cat, and one who would fight to the bitter end to keep his prisoner.

Though conscious in his own strength, Barton Keys cared not to risk a struggle with a man whom he knew to be armed, and which might end against him.

Therefore he drew back into the hallway, and placed his hand upon a stout stick which he had before observed stood in a corner near by.

Armed with this he again stepped to the door, the stick was swung in the air and fell with stunning effect upon the head of the unsuspecting jailer.

Down from his bench he dropped, his pipe still between his teeth, while Barton Keys, maddened at his triumph sprung forward and drove the knife into his broad breast.

Then he took the keys that hung to his victim's belt, seized his weapons and ran rapidly toward the small stable in one corner of the jail-yard.

Here the jailer's horse, a splendid animal, was found, and quickly saddled and bridled, and led out of the inclosure.

Then, locking the gate in the wall behind him, and thrusting the key into his pocket, the fugitive mounted, and dashed away like the wind, a wild cry of triumph bursting from his lips as he disappeared in the forest of pines near by.

CHAPTER II.

THE MYSTERIOUS LETTER.

THE Brandt plantation, on the shores of Mississippi Sound, was one of the grandest estates on that beautiful body of water, at the time of which I write, which was many long years ago, kind reader, when our now great country of over fifty millions of souls, was in its infancy.

Colonel Brandt, the supposed owner of the commodious mansion and its broad acres, came of good old French stock, and had married an American heiress, the mistress of the rich lands that were known as her husband's plantation.

With his many good qualities, Colonel Brandt was cursed by one fault, that of gambling, which, having wrecked his own fortune, had caused his father, his wife, and her parents, at their death, to will their property to the two children, Maud and Irving, the colonel controlling it in a measure, yet having no legal claim upon it, else he might in a moment of temptation gamble away the inheritance of his children.

A year prior to the opening of this story, Maud Brandt had finished her education at a fashionable boarding-school in New Orleans, and at once became a reigning belle, sought by innumerable lovers for her beauty, her character and her wealth, the latter being the star upon which the eyes of her sordid lovers were fixed. To Soule Ravelle, a young planter who had inherited a fortune, and quickly loaded it with mortgages by his vices, Maud had been engaged by a compact between old Mr. Ravelle and the colonel.

But the death of Soule Ravelle, as was supposed by the hand of Bradford Carr, put an end to the engagement, and the real murderer, Barton Keys, aided by the influence he held of gambling debts over Colonel Brandt, had become the maiden's expected husband, poor Maud yielding to save her father.

Irving Brandt, Maud's brother, was the real owner of Brandt Mansion, its acres and slaves, and the boy's noble nature was such that it had fallen into good hands, for, seeing the weakness of his father, he had determined to shun cards as a viper, and prove himself worthy of the inheritance that would be his when he reached man's estate.

Remaining at home, Bradford Carr had be-

come his tutor, and though the brand of murder had been put upon the young teacher, and he had been sentenced to die upon the gallows, Irving Brandt had not only not believed him guilty, but had been the one to attempt to screen him from death, and in this he had been nobly aided by his sister Maud, who, though bound, at first, to Soule Ravelle, and next to Barton Keys, had felt that her heart was in the keeping of another, poor, friendless, and a victim though he was.

The return of Bradford Carr to the Blue Anchor Inn, one year after his escape from jail, and his proving his innocence, and Barton Keys's guilt, made him a hero, especially when it was known that he had cruised the seas as the Pirate Priest, though in reality he was a hunter of ocean outlaws, instead of tearing the stigma himself of piracy.

After all the excitement that had passed, Colonel Brandt determined to return to his home with his family, and leave the Blue Anchor Inn until the following season.

Thither did Bradford Carr accompany the Brandts, to resume the duties of tutor to Irving, and once again in the grand old home, one and all felt relief, after all they had gone through.

For several weeks all went well at Brandt Mansion, and Maud was happy in the love of the one man that could be her heart's ideal, Bradford Carr, who had won her promise to some day in the future become his wife.

But one day as the two sat together in the arbor overlooking the blue waters of the sound, a small boat was descried standing along the coast.

In it were two men, and it came swiftly along under pressure of a fair breeze.

Watching it, they saw it land at the little pier, and one of the men came forward, and seeing them in the arbor, advanced toward them.

He was in seaman's garb, with a dark, bearded face, and spoke in Spanish as he asked:

"Is not this the *Senor Capitan Carr*?"

"I am Bradford Carr, senior," responded the young tutor.

"The senior who was once known as the Pirate Padre?" asked the seaman.

"Yes," and the face of the tutor flushed.

"I have a letter for you then, senior."

He handed to Bradford Carr as he spoke a letter, bearing a heavy seal, and addressed to

"EL CAPITAN CARR,

THE PIRATE PADRE,

Brandt Mansion."

Breaking the seal Bradford Carr read the contents of the letter, Maud closely watching his face the while, and growing anxious as she saw him grow pale and look worried.

Having read the letter, Bradford Carr stood a moment in deep meditation.

Then he handed the letter back to the man and said sternly:

"Tell the writer of this that I will make no terms with him."

"Is this your answer, senior?"

"Yes, the only answer I will give."

"Go!"

The seaman politely touched his tarpaulin, and turning, walked away, and soon after his little boat was seen sailing back along the coast.

For a long while did Maud wait for some explanation from her lover, of the mysterious visit of the seaman; but not a word did he utter upon the subject, and going to his room he did not reappear during the day.

Upon that same afternoon news reached Brandt Mansion of the escape of Barton Keys from jail, and his murder of the negro, and having severely, perhaps fatally wounded Dick Dresden, the keeper.

With this news Irving Brandt sought his tutor's room, and found him pacing to and fro, with a pale, anxious face.

He heard the startling tidings in silence, and was then left alone with his moody meditations, all wondering at his strange conduct, and Maud telling of the visit of the boat and the mysterious letter to account for it.

The next morning Bradford Carr appeared as was his wont, bright and early, and he had the same cheerful air as before; but it was evidently assumed, for his face was pale and wore a haggard look.

Thus matters went on for several days, and though the young tutor tried to appear himself, it was very evident that it was an effort and was forced, and all began to fear that some deep sorrow had fallen upon him which would change his whole life, while Maud grieved deeply to be so wholly shut out of his confidence.

CHAPTER III.

WHAT THE MOONLIGHT REVEALED.

Two weeks had passed away since the reception of the mysterious letter by Bradford Carr, and which had seemed to cast such a shadow upon his life.

Still did he remain with the same gloom upon him though he tried to appear as was his wont, and Colonel Brandt begun to feel deep anxiety regarding him.

As for Maud, she felt more and more hurt, while she could see that he was changed in his manner toward her, and bright, rollicking Irving pronounced his dearly loved tutor as cross as a bear.

News had come to them that Chester Granger had left New Orleans, going no one knew where, and no trace of Barton Keys could be found, after his flight from the jail, though his horse had been discovered dead upon the beach, near a lagoon, which it was evident that the fugitive rider attempted to swim across.

It was hoped that Barton Keys had also perished; but not finding his body with the horse, it was feared that he had escaped, as he was known to have been a superb swimmer.

Dick Dresden had rallied from the stunning blow and knife wound, and was rapidly recovering; but his negro assistant had been laid away forever beneath the pines, and his life registered against his murderer.

The frequenters of the Blue Anchor Inn had hied them homeward with the end of the heated term, and the massive old structure, once the abiding-place of a Spanish Don, had been closed for the winter, excepting the wing in which dwelt the genial landlord and his family.

Thus matters stood in the first month of fall along the shores of Mississippi Sound, when one bright moonlight night Maud Brandt sat at her window gazing out upon the lawn and the waters beyond.

It was a lovely picture that was spread out before her, for the dark live-oaks here and there shaded the lawn, the shores of the Sound, with its dark background of pines, stretched away for miles before her vision, and under her gaze were the restless waters, breaking upon the sandy beach with dirge-like murmurs that seemed to chime in with her heart.

In the little land-locked basin, known as Brandt Manor Harbor, rode at anchor Irving Brandt's beautiful yacht, the Lady Maud, and here and there, like a flock of young sea-birds hovering near their mother, were little sail and row boats.

That day Bradford Carr had been more strangely moody than before, and with a heart full of tears at his conduct, Maud had retired to her room after tea, dismissed Ellizette, her octoroon maid, and told her that she wished to be alone.

With Maud absent from the library, and the young tutor in his room, Colonel Brandt and Irving had early retired, and the house was soon in deep repose.

But at the window sat Maud, her wrap drawn around her, for the air was chilly, and her eyes resting upon the hallowed scene, though seemingly she saw it not.

Thus the hours passed away, and the singing of the slaves in the "quarters" had died away, and the last light had been put out, and the murmur of the waters alone broke the stillness of the night, almost like unto death.

Suddenly a white object glimmered in the moonlight, out upon the waters, and caught the eyes of the maiden.

"It is a vessel," she muttered, and then, as she watched it more closely, she added:

"It is a small coasting lugger, and is standing in toward the harbor."

Those were dangerous times along the Gulf coast, and Maud was about to go and arouse her father, when she beheld a form glide out from beneath her window, and walk rapidly toward the shore.

"It is Mr. Carr," she said to herself, and she drew back, as he turned and gazed up to her window.

A moment he stood looking up at the window and then, passing his hand across his forehead he walked on toward the harbor shore.

He evidently saw the coming lugger, for after halting at the arbor a few moments he walked down upon the pier, and soon after the strange sail luffed up and lay to.

Then a boat shot out from its side, and as no sound was heard, Maud knew that the oars were muffled.

What could it mean?

What was the vessel?

Why did Bradford Carr stand there awaiting her coming, and giving no alarm when her actions were certainly most mysterious in these days of piracy?

These questions Maud could not answer, but with perfect confidence in her lover she remained quiet, looking on, waiting and wondering.

When the boat touched the pier she saw Bradford Carr enter it and row off to the lugger.

Then minutes, that seemed like hours to her, passed away.

At last the boat came again to the pier, and a tall form sprung out and advanced toward the mansion.

"It is Bradford returning, though the lugger still remains.

"Oh! what does it all mean?" cried Maud.

In his approach to the mansion the young tutor did not follow the path that led under Maud's window, but went around toward the wing in which was his own room.

For some little time he was gone, and then he reappeared and returned to the dock.

Then Maud saw him enter the boat, which was at once rowed out to the side of the Lady Maud.

She saw the crew leap lightly on board, and another boat leave the lugger for the side of the pretty yacht, while a splash in the water told her that the strange vessel had dropped anchor.

Once or twice a boat passed between the two vessels, and to Maud's intense surprise she saw the white sails set upon her brother's beautiful yacht, and the next moment the Lady Maud swung round to the wind and went flying out of the harbor.

Then, the shriek that rung forth through the mansion aroused all within its walls, and sent Colonel Brandt, Irving, and the startled servants in haste to her room.

They found her kneeling upon the floor, her form resting upon the open window-sill, and unconscious, for, what the moonlight had revealed to her had sent the blood to her heart in torrents, and she had sunk into a deep swoon that strangely resembled death.

CHAPTER IV.

THE FUGITIVE.

So sudden had been the escape of Barton Keys, that he had formed no plans by which to guide his future.

That he was outcast from his fellow-men he was well aware and could never expect to hold up his head among those who had known him.

Feeling this, he knew that he had either to seek some far-away scene where he was wholly unknown, or to cast his future with other outlaws.

If the former he might be able to build himself up as an honorable man, among those who did not know him; if the latter, he must go with the tide where it led him.

He chose the latter, for though foiled, he had not given up hope of having his own way yet.

"I am free, and I have plenty of money with me," he hissed as he dashed along, referring to the fact that he always kept a large sum with him, in case of his having at any time to fly for his life.

This money he had sewed up in his clothing, and pressed his hand caressingly upon it, well knowing its value to him in his flight and danger.

The horse he rode was a good one, and with no mercy for the beast he urged him on at full speed for miles.

His way was along the coast toward a dense forest, unsettled and unfrequented, save by occasional hunters, and rumored as being the resort of smugglers.

To reach this point of land he had to cross an arm of the sound, or inlet, penetrating inland for several miles.

It was a haven of refuge for him, the forest was, and if he found no living being here he could lie hidden there for days, his pistols getting food for him.

But he hoped that it was the resort of outlaws and he made up his mind as he rode along to cast his fortunes with them.

His tired horse seemed to dread taking the water for the long swim across, but was urged on by his cruel rider, who was not certain that he had not been pursued.

"If I find no outlaws here, it will be a secure retreat for me, until I can venture out some night and get a boat from the nearest coast plantation.

"Come, you lazy brute, you must take the swim, long as it is," and he forced the animal into the water.

For some distance it was shallow; but the tide was running in, and the inlet was rapidly deepening so that the horse soon lost its footing and was swimming along, guided for the distant shore on the other side.

Here and there a shoal and a sand-bar gave the horse a temporary rest, and it was needed, for after his long gallop of hours, and hard swim in the cold water, it was beginning to tell upon him sadly.

Seeing this, Barton Keys halted longer upon every bar and shoal, dismounting to rest his horse all that he could, for he knew that the end was not yet.

Before him stretched the expanse of waters, and the dark line of forest seemed still a long way off.

And more, the flats he was then passing over, and he knew that the main channel lay before him.

To add to his danger, the tide, which had before been bearing him inland, now turned, and began to run out, and if he should not be able to reach the other shore, there was every chance for him to be swept out to sea.

"Come, this won't do," he cried, as the full danger of his situation flashed upon him, and he bounded into his saddle, from the knee-deep water in which he was standing, and once more urged his horse onward.

The noble animal went forward once more, and was soon breasting the deep waters in his hard swim.

A shoal here, a sand-bar there rested him momentarily, but these soon grew less frequent,

the waters deepened, and at last Barton Keys knew that the ordeal had come.

The broad expanse of waters before him were deep, the tide was strong, bearing him swiftly seaward, and the forest-lined shore was yet half a mile away.

Could his horse make it?

That was doubtful, but the noble animal was doing his best.

Should he give up, then the worst would have to be met by the man.

He was, however, a bold swimmer, and was hopeful.

At last his horse showed the greatest distress, he snorted and plunged wildly, and his head went once wholly out of sight!

"Great God! the animal is drowning, and my foot is fast in the stirrup!" suddenly cried the fugitive in a voice that was almost a shriek of despair, as he realized his terrible danger, when attempting to free himself from his saddle to continue the swim shoreward unaided.

CHAPTER V.

THE STRUGGLE WITH THE WATERS.

HARDLY had Barton Keys realized his fearful danger, before his horse, with a despairing groan, sunk beneath the waters.

Saturated with water, as were his boots, and riding carelessly along, he had allowed his feet to slip into the stirrups too far, and one of them thus became fastened in it beyond any effort to withdraw it.

As his horse went down in the flood, he drew his rider with him, and the man put forth his great strength to free himself from the animal.

But this was no easy task, and deeper and deeper sunk the dead beast with his living rider.

Rendered desperate, Barton Keys braced himself against the back of the animal, and tugged at the strap.

Suddenly it gave way, and the man was free, and rapidly rising to the surface, though the stirrup was still about his foot.

At last he rose above the waters, gasping for breath, and could only float and rest, as the tide swept him along.

Then, when rested, he struck out for the shore, and swam with a strong stroke.

But the forest seemed further away than before, the tide bore him swiftly along, and he could already discern where the land ended and the broad expanse of waters began.

Once past these points and he was doomed.

With desperate energy he swam on.

But the weapons of the jailer weighed him down, and these he cast from him.

This relieved him for a while, and then his boots became irksome.

These he cut off with the knife which he still clung to, and thus swam with greater ease.

But his coat soon made itself felt, and in this was his money and he could not let it go.

But soon he was forced to, after cutting out the bank notes from their hiding-place.

Once more he struggled on, and yet the dark forest line seemed strangely far away.

"Great God! will I fail after all, and perish as my horse has done?" cried the man, panting for breath.

Again desperate he made another bold struggle, and soon saw that he was nearing the shore.

But he was becoming weaker and weaker, and feared that he could never make it.

But on he swam, his strokes growing more feeble, and his strength rapidly failing him.

Then before him swept the scenes of his life, his deeds of evil, and he felt that the end had come with bitter punishment upon him.

"Lost! Lost! I am forever lost," he shrieked in wild tones, striking out blindly, and seemingly merely struggling to keep from sinking.

Then up went his arms into the air, and he would have sunken, but for a hand that grasped his own, while a voice cried:

"I have you safe, so do not despair."

But Barton Keys was a dead weight now, having become unconscious, and his rescuer found that it was no easy matter to drag him from the water.

And that rescuer was no strong man, but a woman, with a slender form that one would not have believed capable of the strength exhibited in drawing the man into the little boat.

It was hard work for her, but she was successful, and springing to the tiller once more she spread her little sail to catch the wind and once more sped along over the waters, heading for the same dark shore which Barton Keys had tried so hard to reach.

A sail of a few minutes brought the boat to the forest-lined banks, and suddenly, just as the craft seemed about to strike the shore it shot out of sight through an arch in the overhanging trees, into a bayou that was narrow and deep.

Here the sail was lowered, the oars were seized and the boat was urged on for a short distance when it came out into a lake-like expanse of water, calm as a mill-pond, surrounded wholly by forest-lined shores. Straight across it the boat was urged, toward the center, where loomed up at anchor a lugger, on board of which glimmered a single light.

Alongside of this craft the boat made a stop, and was made fast, when the one who had dragged Barton Keys from the water bent over him an instant, her hand upon his pulse.

"He is not dead, for his pulse still beats, and he will soon revive."

"I will tell father," and she sprung over the side of the bulwarks, and advanced toward the cabin of the lugger, from the companionway of which shone a bright light.

Hearing her step upon the deck, a man met her in the companionway, a gun in his hand—but upon seeing her, cried out:

"It is you, Rita! But why did you not give me the signal, for you startled me?"

"I forgot it, father, for I was lost in deep thought. But come; I have a guest for you, and he lies unconscious in my boat along-side," and she led the way back to the little craft, the man following her in a cautious manner that hinted of one ever suspicious of danger to himself.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SEA OWL.

"WHO is this guest, Rita?" asked the man, as he hesitated before looking over into the boat.

"I do not know, father," answered the girl.

"Then, in hades's name, why brought you him here?" was the angry response.

"I went, father, as you told me, to the mouth of the inlet, to see if there was any signal from the brig, and, finding none, I was returning, when I caught sight of a man struggling in the water, and heard his cry that he was lost."

"I drew him into the boat, and—"

"Better have let him drown, girl."

"I thought otherwise, father, and saved him, though he has been unconscious ever since."

"I will see him; but I wish no strangers here, Rita."

"Well, father, he is in distress, and needs our aid."

"He shall get his deserts at my hands, Rita," and with this, the man sprung over into the boat.

The girl watched him as he bent over and placed his hand upon the form of Barton Keys.

"Ah! he has a watch; and here is something that will pay for his picking up," and the man took the roll of bank-notes from the pocket of the still unconscious fugitive.

"He is not of our stripe, girl; so, as he is still unconscious, I will just let him go overboard," continued the brutal man; and, as he spoke, he raised the limp form and dropped it into the water.

"Oh, father! what have you done?"

"You shall not murder that unconscious man, for I will again save him!" and the girl sprung from the lugger's deck into the water, and grasped the clothing of Barton Keys just as he was disappearing from sight.

"Girl, let him drown, I say!" yelled the infuriated man.

"I will not, father, so drag us out together, or I sink with him," was the bold response.

"Curses! how dare you do what I forbid?"

"I will not be a hand to aid you in committing murder, father."

"Well, Rita, I guess you are right, so I'll give him a chance, and it will be time enough to kill him when I find him dangerous."

"Here, give me hold of him and I'll drag him in."

Seizing Barton Keys, the man quickly drew him into the boat, and almost unaided, the girl followed.

Then the two raised him to the deck of the lugger and bore him to the cabin.

There the light fell full upon the handsome face of the fugitive, and the father and daughter gazed upon him with surprise.

The girl was dripping from her spring into the water, but she was neatly clad, and her clinging dress displayed a form of grace and elegance.

She was apparently twenty years of age, with a face that was more attractive than beautiful, and with a voice and manner strangely fascinating, while she seemed out of place in that lone spot.

Her father was a thick-set, muscular man, dressed as a seaman, and wearing the look in his bearded face of a thorough villain.

He had a belt of arms about his waist and looked the one to use them.

The cabin of the lugger was large, and furnished with an air to comfort not seen in vessels of her class, though the furniture did not accord as though gotten expressly for the use it was then put to.

A guitar hung on one side, here and there were sketchings and paintings of the coast scenery and marine views, executed by no unskillful hand with pencil and brush, while over all was an air evincing that a woman of refinement was mistress there.

Arms were spread about in quantity, and there was other evidence that the vessel held no legal papers to cruise in those waters; yet somehow the presence of the young woman there seemed to take away the idea that she was a lawless craft.

"I have seen that man's face before, Rita."

"Where, father?" asked the girl, as the two

stood bending over the prostrate form of the fugitive.

"In Orleans, one night, when I was playing in the Chance Palace, I saw him there gambling."

"I was losing, for I am not smart at cards, and was being cheated by a young sharp, and had lost all I had nearly, so was getting desperate, when this gentleman came up, said I was being cheated, forced my man to give up his stealings, and walked off as cool as you please, the fellow obeying him same as though he was his master."

"I got my money and left, and I am right glad I did not drown him now."

"But let us see what we can do for him."

The two now set to work and after a long time Barton Keys opened his eyes.

"I thought I was dead," he said, wonderingly.

"No, sir; you came pretty near it, though," answered the man.

"Ah! who saved me from drowning, for I felt myself seized as I was going down?"

"My daughter saved you, sir."

"Is that your daughter?" and Barton Keys sat up with an effort and turned his eyes admiringly upon the maiden, who blushed under his gaze.

"She is," was the curt reply.

"Well, I would never believe it," said Keys.

"Why?"

"Because she looks the angel she doubtless is."

"Ah! that means that I look the devil I am?"

"Well, you are not far wrong as regards us both, shipmate, but you did me a good turn once, and now I have done what I can for you."

"What did I do for you?"

"Saved my money, one night in Orleans at the Chance Palace, when I was being cheated by a sharp."

"Yes; I recall your face now, and I believed you then to be another person, so made the fellow give you back your money, for he was a useful tool of mine."

"But who are you?"

"I am Captain Restel."

"Ah! I have heard of a smuggler of that name, who is also known as the Sea Owl."

"I am the man, sir."

"A smuggler?"

"Yes, sir."

"And that is your daughter?"

"She is."

"This is strange."

"She is a woman, sir, and loving her father has followed him through good and evil."

"But enough of myself, tell me who you are?"

"First tell me where I am?"

"In my vessel, which is anchored in my retreat."

Barton Keys looked around the cabin, and then, as his eyes fell again upon the smuggler's daughter, Rita Restel, he said:

"And you saved my life?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thanks will never repay you."

"I wish no thanks, sir."

"I was coming from the coast in my boat, heard you cry, saw you sinking, and drew you on board."

"Father brought you to the cabin, when I arrived, and I am glad to see you well again."

"Thank you," and the fugitive sat musing, when Captain Restel recalled him to himself with:

"You have not told me who you are, sir."

"Ah! yes."

"And how it is that you were drowning in the inlet."

"I do not fear to tell you now."

"Why not?"

"Because you are a self-confessed outlaw."

"What has that to do with it?"

"I am also an outlaw."

"Ha!"

"Yes, a fugitive from justice."

"No."

"It is the truth, for I was flying to save my life when my horse sunk under me, while swimming the inlet."

"Why did you come here?"

"I had heard that smugglers dwelt here, and hoped to cast my fortunes with theirs."

"Is this true?"

"It is."

"What crime had you committed?"

"I had shot an enemy, and as it was not in a duel, I was tried and sentenced to die upon the gallows."

"To escape that death I killed my jailer and his assistant and fled."

"You are a bold man."

"Thank you; but I hope to become a bolder one."

"You doubtless will; but do you wish to ally yourself with me?"

"I do."

"Well, I shall find out if your story is true, and then you shall be welcome."

"I have ample money with me, which I am willing to place in your daughter's hands as a forfeit, if my story is not true."

"I have your money here, and needs must

believe you, after your offer; besides you look as though you were telling the truth."

"But I am an outlaw, sir, the Sea Owl, as men call me, and, with a price upon my head, I must needs be careful."

"You are right; but you certainly have me in your power, helpless on board your vessel as I am, surrounded by your crew."

"My dear sir, this lugger is my home, and here I dwell with my family."

"My daughter, an old negro and negress, and an Indian spy comprise my household here."

"Often I am at sea with a different craft and crew, for I have to run cargoes of smuggled goods to the cities."

"This vessel anchors here, but she can sail in five minutes, so that it is hard to catch the Sea Owl, as you doubtless know."

"Now you shall be my prisoner, but an honored one, until I find out the truth of your story, and then we can come to terms."

"Now, Rita, let us have some supper and a bottle of my best smuggled wine to put new life into this gentleman, whom I will rig out in a dry suit," and the Sea Owl went to overhauling a chest for clothing, while Rita left the cabin to do as her father directed.

CHAPTER VII.

THE PIRATE'S BAPTISM.

THE crew of the lugger, the home of the Sea Owl, consisted, as he had said, of his daughter, an Indian, and two old negroes, who had followed his fortunes into outlawry, having once been his slaves when a trader on the Gulf shores, an occupation he had given up to turn his attention to smuggling openly, after having been caught in the act by a revenue cutter and had his vessel confiscated.

His daughter had also gone with her father, and the Indian had been one of his trusted spies when he had his trading-vessel, and had rescued him from prison, whither he had been sent by the Government.

Chincopin was the name the redskin answered to, and he was one of the Choctaw tribe, who preferred the deviltry and sea-life of the white man to living among his own people and hunting the forest for scalps or game, as the case might be.

Chincopin spoke English well, and made his way wherever his master sent him, so that he was but a couple of days in finding out just who Barton Keys was, and that he was indeed a murderer and fugitive and supposed to have met his death when his horse went down.

This convinced Captain Restel that his prisoner-guest was a fit companion for him, and so he released him from his confinement upon the third day, and said:

"I find you are to be trusted, Mr. Keys—"

"Ah! you know my name?"

"Certainly, for I had a hint of the jail from which you had escaped, so sent my trusty spy, Chincopin, to ferret out all about you."

"He got you by heart, so we are on equal terms, and now we can talk business."

"Well, sir, now that you know I am an outlaw, tell me how I can start upon a career as a sea-rover," was the response of the reckless young man.

"Ah! you intend to sweep the seas boldly, and not crawl along the coasts by night, picking up silks and laces that pay no duties?"

"I will not be content with being a smuggler."

"A pirate?"

"Why not?"

"That is right, for smuggling is not the thing when a man can do better."

"I have been thinking of piracy myself of late."

"Better stick to smuggling, as you have a daughter."

"Perhaps you are right."

"But you can put me in the way of raising the black flag over a good deck and crew."

"Are you a sailor?"

"An amateur one."

"Can sail a ship?"

"Yes, a schooner."

"Are you not afraid to die?"

"I prefer to live, but if death comes I will meet it."

"Right! now I see that you have a large sum of money here?" and Captain Restel held out the bank-notes he had taken from Barton Keys.

"Yes."

"Do you know how much?"

"About thirty thousand dollars."

"A trifle over, sir."

"Well?"

"It is sufficient to purchase for you a fleet craft."

"And more?"

"Certainly; you can arm her, fit her out thoroughly with it, ship your crew, and have some gold left in your locker as a nest egg to start piracy on."

"But where can I get the vessel?"

"I will buy one for you."

"Where?"

"In Orleans if I can, if not, I'll try Mobile, and then Pensacola, Charleston, and thus on up the coast until I find just what you want."

"You will do this for me?"

"Yes."

"But your own affairs will suffer?"

"No, for after the arrival of the two vessels I expect this week, more will not come in for a couple of months."

"The cargoes I will have to take to Orleans, Mobile and Pensacola in my smuggling lugger, the Sea Owl, and if I cannot buy your vessel there I will go on up the coast."

"You are very kind; but I will accompany you."

"No; you remain here, and I will promise you that I'll return within a short time with a fine vessel and crew for you."

"And your pay?"

"Oh, we can arrange that, for I will be the receiver of your robberies upon the high seas, and sell them for you, and this can be your retreat."

"Very well, sir, I am willing to place all in your hands."

"Right, and I'll leave a few men here to look after the lugger, should you have to go to sea to escape the law hawks."

"Now, captain—captain—what name will you take?"

"I hardly know."

"Keys is a bad name for a pirate, for it has not the ring to it—let me see, Barton is your other name?"

"Yes."

"Well, I have it."

"Yes."

"I'll baptize you as Barto, the Buccaneer."

"How do you like that?"

"The very thing."

"Well, that is settled, and now, Captain Barto, come out of these close quarters, for you are a free man," and the smuggler led the way to the deck of the lugger, where Rita was discovered leaning over the bulwarks and gazing at the dark, moss-hung shores that shut in the basin as though with a wall.

At their approach she looked up, her face flushed, and she turned to Barton Keys, while her father said:

"Rita, this gentleman is no longer my prisoner, but our guest, and I desire to present him to you as Captain Barto, the Buccaneer, for he is soon to raise his flag above the deck of a pretty craft, and my word for it that he will win a name upon the high seas."

The maiden's face paled, and her lips quivered, while she said:

"I am sorry, sir, that you feel it necessary to become a pirate; but you know best, and be you what you may, you have my best wishes."

CHAPTER VII.

BITTER SUSPICIONS.

I MUST now return to Brandt Manor, the night on which the moonlight revealed to the watching mistress of the beautiful house the fact that her lover had set sail in the yacht.

It was a long time before she returned to consciousness; but when she did she rallied quickly, and asked her father who was bending over her most anxiously:

"Has he returned?"

"Has who returned, my child?"

"Bradford Carr."

"He has not been away, Maud; but if you wish to see him, I will have him awakened."

"No, no, he is not there, for he has gone upon the sea, and God only knows where and why."

"He has sailed in the Lady Maud," she said sadly.

"My poor, poor child! her mind is wandering, and I must send at once for the doctor."

Maud heard the words and quickly arose, while she answered sharply:

"Father, my mind is not wandering, and I will not see the doctor."

"I tell you that Bradford Carr sailed to-night in the Lady Maud, for I saw all distinctly from my window."

The colonel sprang to the window and glanced out upon the harbor.

"The yacht is at her anchor, Maud."

With a glad cry the maiden ran to the window, crying:

"Thank God! he has returned."

But one look was sufficient to show her that her father was mistaken, and then she said:

"Father, that is not the Lady Maud, but a lugger, as you will see, by looking closely, that the men came here in."

"What men?"

"Those who came for Mr. Carr."

"And men came for him, you say?"

"Yes, sir, for I saw the lugger run in, a boat came ashore, and Mr. Carr, who had come out into the grounds, went off to her."

"Soon after they all boarded the yacht, got up sail, and stood out, leaving the lugger at anchor where you now see her."

"It was this, father, that caused me to lose consciousness, for my heart and brain seemed on fire at the sight."

"This is remarkable, Maud, and must be at once investigated."

"Though I have had the utmost confidence in Carr, his strange conduct of late, and now his running off with the yacht, seems terribly suspicious."

"It does, sir; but he may have, in some way

when among the pirates, compromised himself and be in their power, so I shall not condemn him until I know that he is what his actions give us cause to suspect."

"You are ever loyal, my child; but we will hope for the best though I fear the worst."

"Now try and get some rest, and bright and early I will set about solving this mystery, if your brother has not already begun, for I see him going down to the shore now."

Leaving Maud in the care of her maid, Colonel Brandt then descended to the lower floor, and calling about him several of the faithful house servants endeavored to learn from them if they had made any discoveries of a suspicious nature.

But all, even to the boatman who had charge of the vessels belonging to the mansion, could give no clew, and they accompanied the colonel to the shore.

There they were hailed by Irving, who, alone, had gone out to the lugger.

Springing into a boat with his slaves Colonel Brandt was rapidly rowed out to the strange vessel.

They found Irving there, and he had a lantern in his hand, and had already lighted the lamp in the cabin.

"How is sister, sir?" he asked his father, as the latter reached the deck.

"She is herself again, Irving, and she says that she saw Bradford Carr run off with your yacht, and a crew who came in on this vessel."

"Father, I know that Mr. Carr has gone, for I could find him nowhere, and so has the Lady Maud; but I do not believe that he has run off with her."

"In the name of sense, Irving, why has he taken her?"

"I do not believe that he took her, sir."

"Don't be foolish, my son."

"I am not, sir."

"Yet your sister, who is certainly the staunch friend of Carr, saw him go in her."

"That may be, sir."

"She saw the crew from this craft board the Lady Maud, which at once got up sail and went to sea."

"I do not deny that, father; but I still believe that Mr. Carr did not run off with my yacht."

"What then?"

"I think he was run off with."

"Ha! I had not thought of that."

"But then, Maud says that he went, and was not taken."

"That may be, sir; but he was doubtless inveigled on board the smuggler—"

"The smuggler?"

"Yes, father, for I recognize this craft."

"What is she, Irving?" eagerly asked the colonel.

"She belonged to the smugglers further down the coast, sir, who are known as the Sea Owls."

"Are you sure of this Irving?"

"Yes, father, for when I was the guest of Captain Conover on the revenue cutter, we twice chased this craft, and you can see by the shot-marks upon her that she has run the gauntlet of a hot fire more than once."

"And you recognize her?"

"Yes, sir."

"But how, with only the moonlight and your lantern?"

"She has a large owl as a figure-head, father, and another in her cabin, while her rig and appearance generally is the same as the vessel we cleared."

"I believe you are right in that, my son."

"And I feel that I am right in the surmise that Mr. Carr was kidnapped."

"I hope so, Irving."

"Why, sir, what motive had he for becoming a lawless man, when his future promised so brightly?"

"Your sister suspects that the pirates whom he met, when he was the Pirate Priest, had some power over him."

"Ah, that may be, sir: he received a letter, as we all know, that made him unhappy, and now they may have gotten him on board their vessel, held him prisoner, because he would not agree to certain terms, and then, cut the Lady Maud out, leaving their own craft here in exchange."

"A poor exchange, my son."

"True, father, but this lugger is as fast as the wind, and a good overhauling will make a first class craft of her."

"Well, Irving, we will wait until the morrow and see what it will reveal; but my suspicions are that Carr has turned pirate," and Colonel Brandt returned to the mansion, leaving Irving still upon the lugger, which he was going over, lantern in hand, from stem to stern.

CHAPTER IX.

CONDEMNED BY HIS OWN HAND.

THE morning broke dreary enough for the inmates of Brandt Mansion, for the daylight revealed but too plainly that the pretty Lady Maud had taken flight from her anchorage, while in her place rode gracefully upon the waters the lugger which Irving Brandt asserted was a craft that had belonged to the band of smugglers known as the Sea Owls.

At first glance the lugger was not a prepossessing craft to look at; but a sailor's eye would quickly detect the fine lines of her hull, the taper and rake of her masts, and the fact that her spars and rigging were all of the best make, though old and ill used.

She needed paint and a general overhauling, with new canvas, and a patching up of her many scars, and then Irving Brandt said, as he looked at her critically by daylight:

"She'll be a beauty and hurry the Lady Maud to keep in her wake."

But the morning brought no solution of the mysterious departure of the young tutor.

Strengthened by her brother's views, Maud too cast aside all idea that Bradford Carr had turned pirate, and she hoped that he would soon reappear to vindicate his honor in the eyes of her father, who seemed to have his suspicions deepen rather than diminish against the young tutor, muttering:

"No, the fellow got a taste of the exciting life of a free rover, and his bold nature has craved it too much for him to resist the temptation to turn buccaneer, and we shall soon hear of him, I feel confident, flying the black flag."

This remark the colonel made at breakfast; but the look of reproach which his daughter gave him made him regret his words, for the pain they gave her, while Irving, to change the subject, said:

"Well, father, I intend to run the lugger at once to Mobile, and put her on the stocks for repairs, and I believe that she will carry larger spars, and can spread far more sail than she does, and she, too, shall bear your name, sir, and perhaps may run down my truant Lady Maud."

Colonel Brandt raised no objection to this, but said:

"And, my son, in these troublous times, I think we had better take advantage of the right Government gives us, to arm the vessel."

"The very thing I was going to ask to do, father; but I must be off, and sis, I shall hope to hear good news upon my return, or find Mr. Carr here with you," and, getting his negro crew on board, Irving set sail in the lugger for Mobile, where he at once put her into the hands of a shipbuilder, with instructions to transform her into an armed yacht with all dispatch.

Within two weeks, so hard did Irving press the workmen, the new Lady Maud was ready to sail, and her young commander was delighted with her as she sped down Mobile bay, while her negro crew grinned with delight at her really marvelous speed.

Proud of his vessel, Irving swept into the harbor, and was soon on shore.

His father met him at the pier, and the youth saw by his grave face that something had gone wrong, and eagerly asked:

"Is Maud ill, sir?"

"Yes, she is almost heart-broken, Irving."

"No news of Mr. Carr?"

"Yes."

"Is he here?"

"I am glad to say that he is not."

"Glad, father?"

"Yes, my son, for I have a letter from your late tutor, which condemns him, as I feared, and it has been a hard blow to poor Maud."

"What said the letter, father?"

"Come to the library, and you shall read it."

The youth forgot his vessel in this new sorrow, and silently followed his father to the library.

From his desk Colonel Brandt took a letter.

It had been mailed in New Orleans, and came through the village post, the way in which mails for Brandt Manor were received.

"I will read what he says, Irving."

"It is from Mr. Carr, then?"

"Yes."

Opening the letter, the colonel read as follows:

"AT SEA, OFF BALIZE.

"COLONEL RUPERT BRANDT:—

"SIR:—These, the last lines that you will receive from me, will doubtless surprise you greatly and give you pain, for it is hard to feel that one whom you have cherished and aided has been unworthy of your regard."

"I write you from on board my vessel, a schooner I now command in a career which I well know is an unholy one, yet which I am compelled to assume charge of, as I am held by bonds which I cannot break to those who have served me well in the past."

"I had hoped, when I gave up my title of Pirate Padre, won upon the high seas, it would be to lay it down forever; but I am forced now, from circumstances which I cannot explain, to resume the cutlass, and with it I shall take up the robes of the cross, and become a free rover in reality this time, where I was one only in name before."

"Bitterly do I regret this step; but, a mere creature of circumstances, I must drift with the tide, bear me where it will, and to whatsoever end it may."

"In my heart I feel for the one who has trusted me with her love."

"I refer to your beautiful, noble daughter, and I beg that she may forget me, and that my generous-hearted pupil, Irving, will cast from his bosom the regard he felt for one who was unworthy."

"More I cannot say, nor do I care to, for my heart is too full, my brain on fire in writing this farewell to them I have so dearly loved, and shall ever love, but who must now cast off forever one who gives up honor, hope and all to become known no longer as Bradford Carr, but to sink himself forever in

"THE PIRATE PRIEST."

Irving Brandt stood like a statue while his father read this letter.

His face was deadly pale and his lips were set, while his eyes burned with intense brightness.

"Has my sister seen this letter, sir?" he asked hoarsely.

"Yes, and I feared it would break her heart, as I told you."

"She believes it then?"

"How could she doubt it?"

"Let me see it, sir, please."

The colonel handed his son the letter, and he looked at it searchingly.

"Well, Irving, are you satisfied?" asked his father.

"I am not, sir."

"You still trust Bradford Carr, though condemned by his own hand?"

"I still trust him, father, for I do not believe he wrote that letter."

"Bah! it is his writing."

"So it looks, sir."

"And you think it is a forgery?"

"I hope that it is, sir; but though every line of it seems to have been penned by Mr. Carr, I still believe him true, and I shall go and cheer up sis with this hope," and, like one drowning, catching at a straw Maud Brandt caught at this straw of hope held out to her by her brother, and cried:

"Irving, my noble brother, I, too, shall believe in Bradford Carr, until his own lips tell me that he is guilty."

CHAPTER X.

THE PIRATES' COMPACT.

THE scene again changes, and from the lordly home of the Brandts to the dark-watered, forest-walled basin where lay at anchor the lugger of Restel, the Sea Owl.

It is night, and two vessels lie at anchor in the secret harbor.

One of them is the lugger before seen there by the reader, and the home of the smuggler chief.

The other is the Lady Maud, so cleverly cut out from her honest harborage some time before.

Upon the deck of the latter a man walks to and fro, with the air of one buried in deep thought.

No one else is visible upon the deck, but lights glimmer from the cabin and fore-castle, and the hum of voices is heard in the latter.

A cable's length away lies the lugger, dark and silent.

Suddenly the man halts in his walk, and after thus standing an instant, goes to the side of the vessel, where a small boat is visible.

Springing into it, he seizes an oar, and sculls swiftly toward the lugger.

As he touched the side, a voice said:

"I am glad you have come, for I am very lonesome to night."

He went up over the side, grasped the hand extended to him by the speaker, and descended into the lugger's cabin.

Then the light fell upon the two, revealing who they were.

The one was Barton Keys.

The other Rita Restel, the smuggler's daughter.

The face of the former had changed, even in the short time that had passed since his coming on board the lugger unconscious and nearly dead.

He had thrown off the mask of honesty he had worn, and become stern and reckless.

"Well, it is about time to hear from your father, Rita, is it not?" he asked.

"Yes, he should be here now."

"I am tired of being cooped up here, and long to be upon the seas."

"And I will be sorry when you are gone," she said, sadly.

He saw that he had hurt her, and was about to make a reply, when there rung out over the waters, coming from the lips of some one on the deck:

"Schooner ahoy!"

Instantly the two dashed upon the deck, and as they reached it, heard the answer to the hail:

"Ay, ay! the Sea Owl!"

"I am your chief."

Dazzled by the light of the cabin, the man and maiden could not at first see distinctly.

But, becoming accustomed to the darkness, they beheld a large schooner close upon them, and drifting alongside.

"Ho, Captain Restel, I welcome you!" cried Barton Keys, springing on board the schooner as she came alongside, and seizing the hand of the smuggler.

"And I am glad to return, Captain Barto, for I have been successful, as you will see; for this is a splendid vessel, armed and equipped throughout, and managed by a crew that you will be proud of, for a harder lot of villains, I'll vouch for it, do not sail the seas."

"But come, let me greet my child, and after a chat in the lugger's cabin, I will show you your vessel."

He led the way back upon the lugger, as he spoke, where he was greeted affectionately by

his daughter, and the three went into the cabin together.

"I congratulate you upon your success, Captain Restel, for the schooner seems to be a beauty," said Barton Keys gleefully.

"She is a beauty, sir, and sails like a witch."

"I had hard work to get her, but succeeded by paying her price to her builder, who then allowed me to cut her out from her anchorage, the day before she was to be delivered to the Government for which she was built."

"You can do well in her, Captain Barto."

"I hope so, I feel so; but about officers?"

"That is all arranged, and you have but to go on board and assume your position as captain."

"I thank you from my heart, captain; but now let us go on board and see her."

"One minute, Captain Barto, for I have a little compact to arrange with you first."

"A compact?"

"Yes."

"You mean as regards the disposal of my booty."

"No, for we talked over that; but it is upon another subject."

"Pray explain."

"I have gotten this vessel for you, as you know?"

"Yes."

"She is as fine a craft as floats, fleet, and fully manned and armed."

"So you said before."

"I spent your money for her."

"So I expected you to do."

"And I told you I would tell you what my pay should be when I had the vessel."

"Yes."

"Now I will tell you."

"I am certainly most anxious to learn."

"First, let me say that you have made a capture since I left?"

"Yes, it is the yacht Lady Maud, and she lies at anchor near us."

"So I know, and you also captured a prisoner?"

"How know you this?"

"I am no fool, Captain Barto, to run into a trap, so I sent my spy, the Indian, into the basin to see if all was right before I came up with the schooner."

"He saw one of the men and learned all."

"Yes, I captured a prisoner, my worst foe."

"Have you killed him?"

"No."

"Well, sir?"

"I intend to make him captain of that schooner, while I serve as his first luff."

"You will do this when he is your enemy?"

"Yes, for in doing so I will have my revenge."

"You can do as you like, Captain Barto, as soon as the vessel is in your hands, which will be when you have agreed to my compact."

"But what about the yacht?"

"I will let you have her to run our booty into port in, appointing certain rendezvous to meet her."

"A good idea; but now to my terms."

"Name them, Captain Restel."

"You are not a married man, I believe?"

Barton Keys's face flushed crimson at this, and then again paled, while he answered after an instant of hesitation:

"I am not."

"Then, Captain Barto, my terms for services rendered are that you shall marry."

"Marry! and whom?"

"My child," was the calm response, while Rita Restel dropped her head in her hands, and sat thus, trembling violently.

"Great God! would you wed your daughter to a pirate?"

"Yes, for her father is one," was the cool response.

"But—"

"I wish an answer, Captain Barto, and no argument."

"My child loves you, and I seek her happiness alone, and will have it at any cost."

"What you are she overlooks in her love of you, and my terms are that you marry her."

"If you agree, I have a priest whom I brought from his parish on the coast, landing and capturing him for the purpose, and he will unite you at once."

"If you refuse, then you can go your way, and I will take the schooner, and hoist the black flag myself."

"How long will you give me to consider?" asked the amazed man.

"Five minutes."

"What!"

"I will give you but five minutes, and I expect your answer in that time," was the firm response.

Barton Keys saw that the smuggler was in deadly earnest, and springing to his feet, he crossed the cabin several times, his face full of emotion.

Then he halted by the maiden, and said

"Rita, will you become my wife?"

"Yes," was the low response.

"Now?"

"Yes."

"I am a pirate, as it were."

"I do not care, for I love you."

"Enough! I will marry her, Restel."

"So be it, and this very night you can sail in your vessel."

Leaving the cabin, Captain Restel was absent a few minutes, and then returning, said:

"The padre will soon be in, and as you are known to him, put on this disguise, and remember that you are Captain Barto, the Buccaneer."

"Who is the priest?"

"Father Homer, of the village you fled from."

"Ah! well, he will not know me in this disguise," and Barton Keys placed upon his face a false beard, and then over his dark locks a wig of long golden hair, which completely changed his appearance.

CHAPTER XI.

CAPTAIN PALAFOX.

SCENES upon the Gulf shores now the plantations of wealthy Southerners, were, at the time of which I write the secret haunts of the bold smugglers and buccaneers of those waters.

With an infant navy as we then had, and a sparsely settled region, it was difficult indeed to ferret out the abiding-places of these reckless sea rovers, and the Gulf of Mexico presenting a rich field for their lawless deeds, along its shores was the theater of action for them, and many an inlet, bayou, and creek was the abiding-place of pirates even until more than a score of years of the present century had passed away.

Here and there were the homes of the rich, and these were seldom molested by the buccaneers, who seemed to feel that they must not commit depredations so near home.

Thus had Brandt Manor, and innumerable other estates escaped a pillaging visit from these rovers.

Among those better known in the Gulf was a man sailing under the name of Captain Palafox, and also called the Sea Fox.

This pirate was known to protect the honest dwellers along the coast, from those of his kind who would gladly have made the rich homes a visit to secure booty.

Time and again Captain Palafox had been chased to his lair, yet never could be taken, and he had become as a pirate, what Restel the Sea Owl was as a smuggler.

Not very many leagues from Brandt Plantation was a heavily wooded district, intersected with bayous, or inlets, and here was the lair of Palafox, the Sea Fox.

And toward the mouth of a narrow bayou, penetrating the recesses of this dark forest, a small sail-boat was heading, some days after the return of Irving Brandt to his home with the lugger.

The craft was a sea skiff, and bounded along over the waters, under pressure of a small leg-of-mutton sail she carried.

In the stern, a hand upon the tiller, sat the only occupant of the little vessel, and a glance was sufficient to show that it was Irving Brandt.

The sun was nearing the horizon, and its light fell upon the handsome, daring face of the youth, tinged it with a rosy hue that looked like a maiden's blush.

Straight in toward the creek's mouth he held his way, and soon the skiff was in the shadow of the forest, and a few moments after the wind no longer filled the sail.

Lowering the sail Irving seized a pair of oars, and sent the skiff flying along up the bayou.

He rowed with no hesitancy, as though doubtful of his course, but with a long, steady sweep that urged the skiff rapidly on.

The forest was draped with moss, the foliage was dense, and the darkness was almost as great then as though the sun had set, for the branches of the trees almost interlaced across the stream.

After a row of some distance, a light glimmered in front, and soon after, as the youth turned and looked over the course ahead, he beheld a group of men standing about a fire built upon a point of land.

They were evidently cooking their evening meal.

In the stream at anchor was an armed schooner of a hundred tons, and it did not take a sailor's eye to detect that she was a very beautiful craft in build and rig.

A sloop, a lugger, a sail-boat, and several row-boats close inshore were also visible, while a cabin stood back upon the point of land where the men were gathered about the fire.

Straight up to the landing rowed Irving Brandt, his coming seemingly not observed by any one.

As his skiff touched the bank he sprung out and dragged it up to a place of security.

Then he walked boldly up the path to the cabin.

This led him by the fire and the group of men, who hardly glanced at him as he approached.

They were a wild-looking set of men, dressed in sailor costume, and evidently formed the crew of the schooner anchored in the stream.

"Lads, can you tell me where I will find Captain Palafox?" asked Irving pleasantly.

One of the men saluted politely and answered:

"Ay, ay, sir; he is in the cabin."

"Thank you, my man," and the youth passed on.

As he approached the cabin a man stepped forth and advanced to meet him.

He was a man with a dark, strong face, well-knit form, and the air of one born to command.

He was dressed in a kind of undress officers' uniform.

As he met the youth, he called out in a cheery voice:

"Well, Master Irving, I am glad to see you."

"And I to meet you again, Captain Palafox; but I came to see you upon an important matter I wish your aid in once more."

"You would hardly give a friendly call to a pirate, Master Irving; but I knew of your coming, and am not only glad to see you, but anxious to serve you in any way in my power."

"You knew of my coming?" said the youth, in surprise.

"Yes; my lookout on the coast reported you an hour ago."

"Ah! I see that you are not to be surprised."

"No; for my neck has no desire to make the acquaintance of the hangman, Master Irving."

"But you must have supper with me, and we can talk business after; but I am sorry my little Myrtle is not here to give us one of her good meals."

"She is still in New Orleans then?"

"Yes; at school, and growing into a splendid girl, if I say so myself, Master Irving."

"But come, for my servant has supper ready and you must be hungry."

"I am," laughed Irving, and he followed Captain Palafox into the cabin, where a table was set for two and a negro was serving up a tempting repast.

The two ate with a relish, and when the table was cleared and a lamp had been brought, Captain Palafox said:

"Now, Master Irving, tell me how I can serve you, and see if, pirate though I am, I have forgotten that you saved my life once."

"Yes, and you have returned the favor, for you took my tutor, Bradford Carr, out of jail when I came and asked it of you, and saved him from the gallows," answered Irving.

"Ah, I should have done that anyhow, for I did not believe him guilty of the murder they would have hanged him for."

"But what a name he made as the Pirate Priest."

"Yes, he won renown and honor, too, when it was found out that he was not really a pirate, but one who was hunting down outlaws upon the seas."

"He never disturbed me," Master Irving.

"Nor should he, after he had saved your life."

"And besides, he looked upon you as I do."

"And how is that, may I ask?" and the pirate smiled.

"Well, as a kind of ocean free lance, who has credit for many evil deeds he does not do, and seeks his booty from other vessels than those of our own nation."

"You are right, Master Irving, and I am intending to give up the sea altogether, and now that my daughter will soon be a young lady, to drop the past, and in some spot far away from here live an honest life."

"I am glad to hear you say this, Captain Palafox, for Myrtle's sake as well as for your own, and I trust soon that Palafox, the pirate, will be known no longer upon the seas."

"But now let me tell you why I have come to see you."

"I am all attention, Master Irving," and lighting his pipe Captain Palafox settled himself comfortably in his easy-chair to listen to what his young visitor had to say.

CHAPTER XII.

IRVING'S REQUEST.

"CAPTAIN PALAFOX, I am in trouble," said Irving Brandt, after a moment of silence, and thus opening the reasons for his visit to the Lagoon Lair.

"Well, my young friend, what can I do to help you out?"

"You are aware that my tutor, Bradford Carr, returned home in honor?"

"Yes, and once more resumed his tutorship at home."

"True, while Barton Keys, the murderer and villain who would have sacrificed him for a deed of which he himself was guilty, was tried and sentenced, but escaped from prison."

"To die in the sea, I have heard?"

"Yes, it is so believed, for his horse was found where he had attempted to cross to Smuggler Forest."

"But it is not of that wretch that I wish to speak, but of Bradford Carr."

"He was living happily at our house, and I may as well tell you frankly was engaged to my sister, when one day he received a letter which made a different man of him."

"What that letter was we could only surmise, but it seemed to deeply worry him, and father, sis and myself came to the conclusion that it

was from some of his old crew who had served him as the Pirate Priest."

"Well, some time ago my sister was seated at the window one night and saw a strange lugger run into our harbor."

"She also saw Mr. Carr meet the crew on the dock, and soon after my yacht, the Lady Maud, was boarded and set sail for the Gulf, leaving the lugger at anchor."

"Mr. Carr went with the yacht, and the cry my sister gave as she saw him leave with the pirates alarmed the house."

"I boarded the lugger and found it to be the smuggler craft known as the Sea Owl."

"No one was on board and it was clear that she had been left in place of the Lady Maud."

"Knowing the craft to be a good one, I took her to Mobile and had her thoroughly overhauled and armed, and she is now at Brandt Harbor."

"And Mr. Carr?" quietly asked the pirate.

"Well, my father received a letter from him, dated off the Balize and here it is," and Irving handed the letter to the Sea Fox to read.

"Well, this looks as though he had turned pirate."

"It looks so, yes."

"But you do not believe it?"

"I do not."

"What then?"

"I think the letter is a forgery."

"Ah! and—"

"And feel that Mr. Carr has been kidnapped by some enemy."

"You know his writing?"

"Perfectly."

"And this letter?"

"Certainly seems to be his writing, for, were it upon another subject, than admission of his guilt, I would swear that he wrote it."

"But now you do not think so?"

"I certainly do not, and it is having this belief, which is shared in by my sister, that I have come to you."

"Does your sister know that you came here?"

"No indeed, Captain Palafox, no one knows that I am your friend, for such I am, and I would not wish any one to know it."

"Chance caused me to serve you and because you were helpless in my hands I saved your life and brought you to your lair."

"You have returned that kindness and we are quits; but I know you and that you have a noble heart, and I have come again to you."

"You have done right, for I am your friend, so tell me how I can serve you."

"Go in search of the Lady Maud and find out who ran off with her, and try and find out for me if Bradford Carr is the guilty one this letter makes him out."

"I will do so, though I was just about to give up piracy, Master Irving."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, for I wish to drop the past, and live for my child now."

"I am so glad to hear you say this."

"And I am glad to say it."

"I had called my band together, and intended to let them go their way in a few days, and retire from the seas."

"But my schooner is here, and I shall do what you ask and look up this mystery, devoting myself to that, and no longer sailing under the black flag."

"As I will no longer make this my rendezvous, I will give you an address in both New Orleans and Mobile where word can be left for me, and I will communicate with you, as soon as I have discovered something definite, regarding the mysterious movements of Mr. Carr."

"Now, it is getting late, and I will give you quarters here or on board my schooner for the night."

"No, thank you, for I must return home at once, as I have a fair breeze," and ten minutes afterward Irving Brandt was rowing down the bayou toward the gulf.

Suddenly he heard the splash of oars, and quickly turned.

But all was silent and dark, and he rowed on, though confident that some boat had been near him.

"It is doubtless a lookout," he muttered, as he stepped his little mast upon reaching open water, and went skimming along over the moonlit waters toward Brandt Plantation.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE PIRATE'S MIDNIGHT VISITOR.

IRVING BRANDT had not been mistaken in feeling that a boat was near him, hidden under the shadow of the moss-hung trees that bordered the banks on either side.

There was a skiff, strangely like his own, coming up the bayou, and as he was in the moonlight one in the stern had caught sight of him.

A word to the person at the oars, and the skiff had darted under the shadow of the trees, and the quick splash given by the oarsman had been the sound heard by the youth.

Clinging to a branch of a tree, those in the strange skiff had waited until Irving Brandt had passed, and then continued on up the bayou.

A row of half a mile and they caught sight of the flickering firelight.

The crew had either gone on board the schooner to turn in, or had rolled themselves up in their blankets and were sleeping under the trees near the fire, so that not a sound broke the stillness of the night.

Landing, the one in the stern of the skiff stepped on shore, and after a low word to the one at the oars, walked toward the cabin, in which a light was still visible.

The other occupant of the skiff wrapped a heavy cloak about him and laid down for a nap in the bottom of his boat.

Meeting no one to challenge him, his comrade went directly up to the door of the cabin and gave a timid knock.

Instantly came the answer in deep tones:

"Ay, ay; come in!"

The stranger raised the latch and stepped within, but with an air of hesitation.

At a table sat Captain Palafox, the pirate, a chart before him, upon which the light of a lamp fell lightly.

Looking up, he started, for he beheld a stranger before him.

A mere youth he seemed, with a slouch hat drawn down over his eyes, and a heavy cloak enveloping his form.

Quickly Captain Palafox arose, and asked sternly:

"Well, sir, who and what are you?"

"I am no foe, Captain Palafox, but one who seeks you in this disguise to ask of you a favor."

"Are we alone?" and the voice of the speaker was soft and low.

"We are, and—"

Ere he could say more the hat and cloak were thrown off and a face was revealed that fairly startled the pirate, for he cried excitedly:

"Great God! you here, Miss Brandt, in the lair of a pirate!"

"Yes, Captain Palafox, I have so far forgotten my dignity as to come by night to the home of outlaws."

"Be seated, Miss Brandt, and feel that I am wholly at your service," said the pirate captain in a courtly way.

Maud sunk into a chair, and after an instant of thought said:

"Do not consider me unmaidenly, in assuming this clothing of my brother, and coming here, for the necessity was great."

"You can never lower your dignity in my eyes, Miss Brandt; but are you alone?"

"My quadroon maid, Ellizette, waits for me in my skiff and she is disguised as a negro lad."

"But why was not your coming reported to me by my look-out at the mouth of the bayou?"

"That I cannot tell you, sir; but I suppose we were not discovered, as I crept along the coast under the shadow for a league, before reaching the bayou."

"Ah! and he patrols seaward, and so missed you. But let me offer you some refreshments and a glass of wine, for you need them," and the pirate placed before the maiden a bottle of rare old wine, with some fruit and biscuit, of which she partook for she felt the need of something to maintain her.

After awhile she said:

"Now, Captain Palafox, my coming to you as I do, proves that I have not forgotten your noble conduct in setting me free, when I was captured in the Lady Maud and brought to you by your lieutenant."

"I never war on women, Miss Brandt."

"So I am well aware; but I must thank you for so nobly rescuing me, in releasing Mr. Carr from prison as you did."

"Ah, Miss Brandt, what little I did for you, you more than repaid, when you told me to send my little Myrtle away from these scenes and make a lady of her."

"Through your kindness she is now honored and loved in the school where you bade me place her, and you have my heartfelt thanks, even though they come from a pirate's lips."

"I thought I understood you to say, Captain Palafox, that you intended to give up this lawless life you lead."

"I said so, Miss Brandt, and I have done so, for I am here now to disband my crew; but a circumstance occurring of late will cause me to still keep the seas, though perhaps not for long; but I pledge you I will not sail as a pirate."

"I am glad to hear this, and more. I am happy to know that you have not yet disbanded your crew, for I have to beg you to render me a great, a very great service."

"Myself, vessel and crew are at your service, Miss Brandt," was the courteous reply.

"You remember," began Maud, after a moment of hesitation, "the gentleman you saved from the gallows?"

"Mr. Carr?"

"Yes, sir."

"He afterward became known as the Pirate Priest."

"He did, but proved that he was not a pirate, but a pirate hunter, and giving up the sea, after clearing his name of the stain of being a murderer, by proving Barton Keys guilty, he settled down at our house once more as the tutor of my brother."

"Some weeks ago he left in a most mysteri-

ous manner, and went away in my brother's yacht.

"Since then my father has received a letter, purporting to come from him, saying that he intends to turn buccaneer, and once more cruise the seas."

"Do you believe that he will do so?"

"I do not, and I believe the letter is a forgery; but you can discover for me whether it is true that he is indeed false to himself and all else."

"I will do this for you, Miss Brandt; but does any one know of your coming here?"

"No one but my maid, and I can fully trust her."

"I did think of making known to my brother of our former meetings, and how you had treated me; but I remembered your request and did not do so, but came myself to see you."

"You are a brave woman, Miss Brandt, and I appreciate the trust you place in me, and will escort you back some distance on your way, for you must arrive home before dawn."

"I am anxious to do so, though we left in daylight, and changed our clothes at an old cabin on the shore; but I have your promise, and return happy with hope, for I am confident you will find that Mr. Carr is not what that letter would lead us to believe."

After a few moments' longer conversation, with his fair visitor, Captain Palafox escorted her to her skiff, and then calling out a boat's crew, he took the tiller and turned the little craft out of the bayou and started it well on its way homeward, his men wondering who it could be that their chief was so attentive to.

Returning to the schooner, the pirate chief gave orders to his men to all get on board, and just as the sun rose the saucy vessel glided out of the sluggish waters of the bayou into the Gulf, and spreading her huge sails went howling merrily along, her commander determined to keep his pledges made to Irving and Maud Brandt, and solve the mystery that, hung about Bradford Carr's strange flight from a happy home and those who loved him.

CHAPTER XIV. CUTLASS AND CROSS.

SOME weeks after the visits of Irving Brandt and his sister to the Sea Fox, in his retreat in the bayou, rumors began to float along the shores of the depredations of a strange buccaneer craft.

It was reported to be a large schooner, built as trim as a race-horse, and carrying clouds of canvas, with a heavy armament and crew of desperate men.

Some had it that her captain was dressed in female garb, as they had seen a woman upon his decks, and others reported that he wore priestly robes.

The flag of this strange cruiser was said to be a black field, with a white cross, crossed by a pair of red cutlasses, and when it became known that Bradford Carr had mysteriously disappeared from Brandt Plantation, it was said that he was the commander, and had in reality turned Pirate Priest.

At Brandt Mansion all seemed to be under a cloud, for Maud went about sad, pale and silent, and her humor was reflected upon her father, while Irving, unable to stand the solemn atmosphere of the place, had gone on a cruise in his yacht, the lugger, accompanied by a crew of a score of slaves, all of whom were good sailors.

One afternoon as Maud sat alone in the sea arbor, looking out over the blue waters, and hoping for the return of Irving, or some message from Captain Palafox, her father came rapidly toward her, dressed in a riding-suit and top-boots, as though he had just dismounted from his horse.

"Maud," he said, as he approached:

"I have just returned from the village, and I learn that this strange pirate, with his cross and cutlass flag has been committing some depredations along the coast above, such as robbing plantation houses."

"Indeed, sir! the pirate is becoming bold."

"Yes, and will doubtless pay us a visit next."

"But, Maud, all now unite in saying that this ruthless sea rover is none other than Bradford Carr in his old garb of the Pirate Priest."

"Father, you know that I do not, cannot believe this, so why do you try to force such belief upon me?"

"My child, your love for that man causes you to be blind to his guilt, for in my mind he—Hal! there went a heavy gun!"

The colonel stopped short in his sentence, as the deep boom of a cannon came rolling over the waters.

An instant of suspense and waiting, and then again came the deep boom, while out from beyond a point of land down the coast, suddenly shot a vessel into sight.

"It is Irving!"

"The Lady Maud!" cried both father and daughter in a breath, as they recognized the little craft, for it was but a league away.

"Father, she is flying from some foe, for see the sail Irving carries in this breeze—see! he is firing."

As Maud spoke there came a puff of smoke

from the stern gun of the Lady Maud, and the report soon followed, but was broken by the deeper, heavier boom of a large cannon, fired by some vessel around the point of land, and not yet visible to those watching on the shore.

It was certain that the lugger was flying for safety along the coast, for she had every stitch of canvas set that would draw, and her crew were busy doing all they could to add to her speed.

With a glass, taken from a bracket in the arbor, Colonel Brandt had a better view, and said:

"Irving is now aiming that stern gun, to fire upon his foe, whoever it is," and, as the colonel spoke there came a white puff of smoke, followed by the roar of the gun.

Almost immediately came the roar of a heavier piece of ordnance, and a shot was seen to plow up the waters near the stern of the flying lugger.

The Lady Maud had at first seemed to head for the harbor, but, as though feeling that he would not find safety there, Irving had changed her course so as to stand seaward, and also perhaps to draw the enemy after him and away from his home.

As he did this, both Colonel Brandt and Maud uttered an exclamation, for the foe suddenly shot into view.

It was a long-hulled schooner, with raking masts, which bent under the pressure of canvas upon them.

She was armed, had a large crew upon her decks, and was driving fiercely along in chase of the lugger, which had a lead of something over a mile.

"It is that strange buccaneer!"

"See his flag, Maud," cried the colonel excitedly.

Maud seized the glass and bent it upon the schooner.

After an instant she said slowly:

"Father, he carries a black flag with a white cross in the center—"

"Ha! I told you so! It is the Pirate Priest, and he is none other than Bradford Carr."

Unheeding her father's words, Maud continued slowly:

"The flag has a black field, a white cross in the center, and in the corners are a skull, a pair of crossed bones, an anchor and a pair of crossed cutlasses respectively."

"The skull and cross-bones are white, and the anchor and crossed cutlasses are red."

"It is certainly a pirate's flag, and a strange one to mingle the cross with the Death's head and bones, the red cutlasses and the Anchor of Hope."

"It is the flag of Bradford Carr, I'll warrant."

"Father, why are you so vicious toward Mr. Carr?"

"I feel that he has deceived us all, and been a pirate at heart all the time."

"You wrong him, sir; but see, the pirate again fires at the lugger, and brave brother Irving is leading him to sea after him, to keep him away from here."

"Yes, and is gaining on him, too, for that lugger sails like the wind."

"Ah! that shot barely missed the lugger," and Colonel Brandt gazed upon the chase with the greatest anxiety, until he saw that the lugger was showing the schooner a clean pair of heels, and running out of range of her fire.

CHAPTER XV.

THE WARNING.

UNTIL the two vessels grew dim in the distance, the father and daughter watched them, surrounded by a group of slaves, who had been drawn to the scene by the firing, and stood in amazement gazing upon the chase, while many a fervent prayer was offered up by them for the safety of "young massa."

As Colonel Brandt and Maud were about to return to the mansion for supper, a small sailboat was seen coming close in along the coast.

It had but one occupant, and was making directly for the Brandt Harbor.

Watching it, they saw it run in and land alongside the dock, when a man in sailor's garb sprang out and advanced toward the arbor, having evidently seen the colonel and his daughter standing there.

The man came on at a quick, firm tread, and politely doffed his tarpaulin to Maud, while he said:

"Pardon, lady; but are you Miss Brandt?"

"I am, sir," answered Maud, in surprise.

"I have a letter for you then, lady," and the man took from his pocket a letter, and was handing it to Maud, when her father attempted to take it.

Instantly he drew it back, with the remark:

"It is for Miss Brandt, not yourself, sir."

"I am this lady's father, sir, and have a right to—"

"What right your daughter may give you, sir, I have nothing to do with; but my orders are to give this letter into the hands of Miss Brandt only, and I shall obey them."

"Insolent fellow! I will have the letter taken from you, and punish you for—"

"Father! be calm, please, for I consider myself fully able to look after my own affairs."

"Hand me the letter, sir, if you please," and Maud spoke in a way that checked her father's gathering temper at being sighted, as he believed, by the bearer of the letter.

The seaman promptly placed the letter in Maud's hand, and she gazed at it an instant before opening it.

It was addressed in a bold hand to:

"MISS MAUD BRANDT,

Brandt Plantation."

Then there was a seal upon it with the device of a fox in a boat floating at sea.

At sight of this Maud's face colored, and then turned pale, and she broke the seal in such a way as to wholly destroy the device.

Opening the letter her eyes fell upon the following:

"Permit one who has the interest of Miss Brandt, and those she loves at heart, to urge that she at once give up her house at Brandt Plantation for one in the city."

"Let her remove, or secrete, all that is valuable in her plantation home, for nothing will be safe there, now that the sea is cursed by one who calls himself the Pirate Priest."

"As delays are often fatal, the writer of this urges that she lose no time in taking the advice thus given her, for the Cross and Cutlass flag of the pirate is now off this coast."

Maud knew well who it was that had written her the warning, and she felt that it was not to go unheeded.

His referring to the "one who calls himself the Pirate Priest," led her at first to believe that the Sea Fox had discovered in the buccaneer none other than Bradford Carr.

But a moment of thought caused her to look at the words, "one who calls himself," with hope that it was other than her lover, and she had hope again.

After an instant, seeing that her father was losing his patience, she handed him the note and asked:

"What do you think of this, sir?"

The colonel read it, and his face paled, while he asked:

"Who wrote you this, Maud?"

"There is no signature, sir, by which I can find out," was the evasive reply.

Wheeling upon the bearer of the letter the colonel said:

"Who bade you give this to my daughter, sir?"

"My captain, sir."

"And who is your captain?"

"That, sir, you must excuse me from answering," was the firm but polite reply.

"But you shall, sir!"

Without heeding the colonel's words and manner, the seaman turned to Maud, and calmly asked:

"Have you any answer, lady?"

"Yes, say to the one who wrote the letter, whoever he may be, that I thank him most sincerely, and shall assuredly heed his warning."

"And at once, lady?"

"Yes, I shall not delay."

"It is better so; farewell," and the man wheeled upon his heel to depart, when Colonel Brandt sprang before him, crying savagely:

"Fellow, if you do not at once tell me who wrote that letter, I will have my slaves seize you and force it from you."

The seaman smiled and answered calmly:

"Colonel Brandt, I came here with a letter of warning to your daughter."

"I have done my duty, and I warn you now that I am not one you can in the slightest degree alarm."

"I am armed, sir, and I am going to my boat, so do not press me, I beg of you."

There was a calm dignity in the man's manner, and a certain fearlessness that awed the colonel; but he saw but one against himself and a score of slaves, and he was determined to have his way, so called out:

"Here, boys, surround this fellow and we will bring him to terms."

But quickly Maud stepped forward and cried:

"Do not one of you obey, for I am mistress here!"

The slaves stood like statues, while Maud turned to her father and said:

"Father, this gentleman must go his way unmolested."

Colonel Brandt knew his daughter's spirit when aroused, and, with a muttered oath, turned on his heel and walked toward the mansion, while the seaman went on his way, after again raising his tarpaulin politely to Maud, who said to herself:

"His bold air betrayed him."

"That man is none other than Captain Palafox in disguise."

"But I dare not now speak to him and ask all that he has discovered about Bradford Carr."

"No, I must bide my time in patience, but I will at once heed his warning and go to New Orleans to dwell," and, having seen the bearer of the letter depart the way he had come, Maud went on toward the villa, expecting a scene with her father.

CHAPTER XVI.

WHAT THE SEAL REVEALED.

In moody silence Colonel Brandt ate his supper, Maud leaving him to his meditations.

After the meal was over the colonel asked: "Do you think the warning you received this morning, Maud, worthy of thought?"

"I certainly do, sir."

"And you wish to leave here?"

"Yes, sir."

"And go to New Orleans to live?"

"For the present, sir, while all is so uncertain and unsettled."

"Well, we will start as soon as Irving returns in the lugger."

"It would be well, father, to be ready to depart immediately upon his return, and I would advise that the servants strip the house of all that would benefit robbers, and store the things back in the cabin in the hills."

"They shall begin work in the morning then, for your faith in this letter leads me to believe that you know more about it than you will admit," and Colonel Brandt eyed his daughter sharply.

Maud felt the color rise in her face, but she answered:

"I have faith, father, in the letter, and I would set the servants at once to work, and not await the morning."

"For my part, I shall begin to pack up to-night," and Maud arose.

"Let me see the letter, Maud."

She took it from her bosom, and was about to hand it to her father, when her glance detected a roll of very thin paper sticking where the seal had been.

Instantly she walked around the center table to hand it to her father, but in doing so pulled off the paper thus adhering through the seal.

The colonel read the letter twice over, and then said:

"It sounds honest and can do no harm."

"We will be ready to start Maud, as soon as the yacht returns."

"And should not Irving return to-morrow, father, we had better depart in the plantation lugger."

"We will, for I am the more convinced that you know more than you will tell."

Maud made no reply, but ascended to her room and locking the door, glanced at the piece of paper she held close in her hand.

It was of very thin texture, and had been closely folded and placed beneath the seal.

It was closely written, though in the same hand as that which had indited the letter.

It read:

"There is a large armed schooner afloat, sailing under a Cross and Cutlass flag."

"Her commander I have not seen at close quarters; but he is dressed in the garb of a priest, is a tall man, and may be the man he is accredited with being."

"I may as well say that there is a female on board the vessel, and this may, in a manner, serve to solve the mysterious departure of the person in whom you are interested."

"I will give you full information as soon as discovered, and will communicate with you through Myrtle, as I feel that you will take my advice and go to the city, for Brandt Mansion is no haven for you just now."

"Should you wish to address me, a letter left with Monsieur Dauphin, at Carteret Arms, Rue Royal, will reach me."

"Do not neglect my warning, but leave your home at once."

This was the secret letter which the broken seal revealed, and Maud read it over twice to fully comprehend its meaning.

Then she paced to and fro for a while, lost in deep thought.

Pausing by the window from which she had seen her lover depart that night, she let the balmy Gulf breeze fan her hot cheeks, while she gazed off over the star-lit waters.

At last she murmured, and with bitterness in her tone:

"I am confident that he too feels that Bradford Carr has turned pirate."

"He says the strange vessel is commanded by a man in priestly garb, and that he is tall, and carries a Cross and Cutlass flag."

"Such was the flag Bradford raised when he became the Pirate Priest and the one over the schooner to-day had in addition the skull and cross-bones with an anchor."

"Then he says that there is a woman on board, and that she may be a solution to the mystery."

"I understand him but too well."

"He means that some love of the past, perhaps a wife, may have appeared on the scene, and thus forced Bradford Carr to give up honor and all and become a pirate, rather than remain here and meet an exposure."

"Oh! what does all this mean?"

"Still, I will not doubt his honor, nor his love, until I know all," and the unhappy maiden bent her head on her arm and burst into tears.

At last she arose, monce more calm, and calling Ellizette, began to pack up for her departure.

For hours she was engaged in this, while down-stairs she heard her father busy with the servants, removing the articles from the house

which would be tempting as booty to sea-robbers.

At last her work was completed and she stepped to the window and again glanced forth.

It was some time after midnight, and the moon, waned to a crescent, was just rising.

Suddenly across its disk appeared a vessel.

An instant only did it hide the moon, and then the vessel swept into full view, and was running straight into the harbor.

"Oh, Heaven have mercy! it is the pirate schooner!" cried Maud, and loudly her voice rung out as she sent the alarm through the house.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE BATTLE ON THE LAWN.

THE cry of Maud alarmed her father, and, with the frightened servants he hastened to her room.

He met her in the hall, and she cried earnestly:

"Alas, father, the warning came too late, for the pirate schooner is now in our harbor!"

Colonel Brandt started as though shot.

He was a brave man, and loved his daughter devotedly, and a picture of her as a pirate's captive flashed before his eyes.

"My child, come with me, for this is no place for you."

"Come, and fly to the plantation and I will remain here and defend our home as best I can."

She hastily threw some wraps about her, seized her jewel-case, and was descending the stairs, with her faithful maid, to meet her father, who had gone to get his arms and order the horses saddled, when a loud voice was heard out upon the lawn.

"Follow me, lads, and sack yonder rich nest; but remember, harm no one!" was the stern order given.

"Oh, Heaven! that voice rings so in my ears," cried Maud as she sprung down the last steps into the hall, and was met by her father who with half a dozen armed slaves gathered about her, just as wild shouts were heard out on the lawn.

"Come, Maud, I will place you in your saddle, and then Abram will be your escort."

"Come, we will leave by the back door."

"No, father, not one step will I stir unless you go with me."

"I will not leave you here to be slain," said the maiden firmly.

Her father knew her well, and that she meant just what she said, and he said quickly:

"Then I will go with you, my child."

"Yes, we will all go together, and leave the dear old home to its fate."

"Come, boys, we must lose no time, for do you not hear their running feet?"

As the colonel spoke he led the way toward the rear piazza, when suddenly there came the ringing words:

"Up and at them, lads!"

There was a ringing cheer, pistol-shots, curses in hoarse voices, orders in stern and trumpet tones, and then the clash of steel against steel.

"Great God! what means this?" cried Colonel Brandt, and he rushed to the front piazza, followed by Maud and the servants.

There all stood aghast an instant, for the late rising moon shed its beams upon a startling and strange sight.

There, upon the lawn, amid the majestic live-oaks, a hundred and more men were engaged in fierce conflict.

In the harbor, close inshore, lay a large schooner, her white sails glimmering in the moonlight, and upon the beach were the boats that had brought her crew ashore.

But no other vessel was near, excepting small sail-boats, and from whence had come those who certainly had attacked the pirates?"

"They are Government men, who knew of the pirates' landing and met them."

"I will lend them the weight of my sword," cried Colonel Brandt, and he bounded away, sword in hand, with all the ardor of his younger years.

Maud called to him to stay, but he did not heed her, and in a moment he was among those who were certainly fighting to defend the mansion, while at his back came half a score of gallant negroes rushing to the rescue.

"To your boats, devils, we are beaten," came in a voice that all heard, and the pirates broke suddenly and went toward their boats, after a volley that staggered their foes.

But they were hotly pressed, and seeing it the pirate leader called out:

"Ho, the schooner!"

"Ay, ay, sir," came from the vessel's deck.

"Train your guns on yonder crowd and fire!"

"To shelter, lads! to yonder mound!" cried the leader of the victorious party, and the men darted toward a large ornamental mound, terraced and beautified with flowers that adorned the grounds.

"But one, two, three, four flashes came from the schooner's side, and as many deep roars followed, while shrieking iron balls went tearing across the lawn, here and there cutting down some poor unfortunate."

But the boats had now reached the schooner, and boarding in hot haste the crew sprung to their posts, and the pirate craft headed out of the harbor.

In amazement Colonel Brandt had seen all, and, with his negroes, who had kept close to him, he too had retreated for shelter to the mound of earth.

Now he turned to those who had saved his home, just as Maud, followed by her maid, came running to the spot.

"My dear sir, I owe much to you, and who is it that I have to thank for such brave work?" said the colonel.

The one he addressed turned upon him and said sternly:

"I am Palafox, the pirate, sir."

"What! that—"

"Come, lads, to your boats, and then pull for our vessel, and we will try and overhaul yonder craft," cried the man who had so abruptly given his name, breaking in upon the words of the colonel.

A cheer answered the words of their leader, who continued:

"Take your wounded comrades, lads, and you, sir, be good enough to bury our dead," and he addressed the colonel.

Then, without a word he led the way across the death-dotted field, picking up here and there one of his wounded men, and crossing the grounds toward a little cove wherein lay his boats.

In speechless amazement Colonel Brandt watched their departure, Maud standing by his side, and then he said in a dazed kind of way:

"Well, my child, it was a case of dog eat dog; but they fought well for us, and we owe our safety and all to that famous pirate, the Sea Fox."

"What will happen next, I wonder?"

CHAPTER XVIII.

FROM DYING LIPS.

ERE the pirate schooner, which had met with such a rebuff at Brandt Mansion, had gotten into the offing, the boats of Captain Palafox were pulling nimbly along the coast, evidently heading for their own vessel, secreted in some retreat not very far away.

Into the mansion went Colonel Brandt and his daughter, after glancing over the scene of carnage, at the bodies of the dead which both sides had left behind, though the schooner's and boat's crews had both carried off their wounded.

In the brightly lighted library Maud paced to and fro, while her father sat in his easy-chair, his brow moody and lips set sternly.

"Well, Maud, we have had a strange experience this night," said the colonel after a silence of some minutes.

"Strange indeed, sir."

"Warned by a pirate of danger, and then, when he found his warning was too late, being on hand to save us."

"My child, what do you know of all this?" and Colonel Brandt looked fixedly into the face of his daughter.

She met the look without flinching, and answered:

"Father, I know we were warned by one who wishes us well, and were then saved by him."

"More I cannot tell you."

Did this mean, thought the colonel, that she could not or would not?

But he dared not ask the question just then, so said:

"Well, Maud, there is one thing I suppose that you saw, which will remove all doubts from your mind."

"And what was that, father?"

"The leader of the pirates."

"I saw him, sir, yes."

"He was in priestly garb."

"Yes, sir."

"He was tall, and—"

"You mean that you recognized in him Bradford Carr?"

"I do."

"I saw him at a distance, father, and he had something the look of Bradford Carr; but I am not yet convinced."

"You are blinded by your love."

"I love you, father, and yet I was not so blinded by my affection that I failed to see that you were destroying yourself, your honor and your name, by persistently gambling as you did, losing large sums under the guise that you were a rich man, when all that you are supposed to possess belongs to my brother Irving and myself."

"I saw your sin, sir, and I could see Bradford Carr's, were I certain that he had sinned; but I must know first that he has, and thus once knowing, I will cast him out of my heart, as though he were a snake."

She spoke earnestly at first, and then with vehement bitterness, and the colonel flinched under her scathing allusion to his sin of gambling, and wisely kept silent.

"I have told the boys to keep a watch over the dead, my child, so let us return and get what rest we can."

This advice Maud was willing to accept, and going to her room she threw herself upon her

bed, and was soon sleeping the sleep of prostration of mind and body.

The summons to breakfast awoke her, and Elizette was by her side to help her dress.

Rising, refreshed in body but weary at heart, she glanced out over the lawn.

The dead still lay where they had fallen, and here and there the lawn was cut up by the shots from the heavy guns.

It was a sickening scene for a young girl to look upon from the window of her own home.

"Poor fellows! there are thirteen of them," she said sadly.

"There's one more, missy, for he was alive, and master had him moved to the little cottage," said Elizette.

"One was alive?" quickly asked Maud.

"Yes, missy, but he won't live long."

"Is he one of the schooner's crew?"

"Yes, missy, he says he is a pirate; but as he is dying they can't hang him."

"Elizette, I must see this man, and at once."

"Quick, arrange my hair in a coil—that will do," and Maud left the room.

She did not wish to meet her father, so left the mansion by the back door and, accompanied by the quadron hastened across the grounds to a pretty little cottage of two rooms, which was used as a gun-room, and in fact was a retreat for Irving.

Here, upon a cot lay a man with a heavily-bearded face, and the stamp of death already upon him.

The country doctor had been sent for, but, unable to do anything for him, he was then in the library with the colonel, awaiting the coming of Maud to go in to breakfast.

The man turned his eyes upon Maud as she entered, and smiled faintly.

Advancing to him, she laid her hand gently upon his forehead and said softly:

"My poor man, you are indeed in great pain."

"It will soon be over, lady," was the low reply.

"Are you sure you are dying?"

"Yes, lady, for I got it in my side hard, and that old Sawbones said it was all up with me, and I guess he knows."

"Were you one of the schooner's crew?"

"Yes, lady, I was, and a hard life I have led, too; but it must end now."

"Is there any message you would like to leave for those you love?"

"Ah, lady, I dare send no message to those I love."

"I was a wild, bad boy, and I went from the right path, and here I am."

"I am an Englishman, lady, and at home they long since believed me dead, and it is better so than to have them know that I died a pirate."

"Well, I regret the past, and hope that mercy will be shown me."

"But I doubt it, lady, I doubt it."

Maud was deeply impressed by the man's words and manner, and in spite of what he had been, she pitied him and felt a certain respect for his courage.

"My man, you say you are dying?" she said softly.

"Yes, lady."

"Will you answer me a few questions?"

"Willingly, lady; but I am going fast, and you must hasten with them, or I'll slip life's cable and leave them unanswered."

"What is the schooner that came in here?"

"A pirate, lady."

"Has she been long such?"

"No, lady; she is new at the business, but her commander is already getting the name of the Ghoul of the Sea."

"And who is that commander?"

"We call him the Padre Captain, lady."

"Is he a priest?"

"The lads say he was intended for one."

"Describe him."

"He is a tall, splendidly-formed man, strong as a lion, and with the nature of a tiger, and he shows his claws often beneath that priestly garb he wears."

"Do you know his name?"

"No, lady."

"Who was he?"

"They say he was the man who was known as the Pirate Priest, and hunted down buccaneers some time ago."

"Is that all you know of him?"

"He was said to be a private tutor in a family on this coast, and engaged to marry an heiress; but he suddenly broke with her and took to the black flag."

Maud could hardly control her emotion; but after a great effort she said:

"Describe his face, please."

"He don't show that as a rule, lady; but it's a handsome face for a pirate, what I have seen of it."

"One question more."

"As many as you please, lady, up to the time my tongue is silenced by death."

"It is pleasant to have you near, lady, wicked as I am."

"Is there a woman on his vessel?"

"There was up to last night, lady, a woman, and a handsome one, too."

"Who is she?"

"His wife, the lads say who know."

"And where is she now?"

"He landed her, or rather put her on board of a lugger to send her home, wherever that is."

Maud gave a deep sigh, and then said:

"Did you ever notice his hands?"

"Yes, lady, and small, shapely ones they are; but merciless to all they are raised against."

"Does he wear a ring?"

"Yes, lady."

"Please describe it."

"A gold band holding a blood-red stone, in the center of which is a diamond of great beauty."

Maud shuddered and drooped her head.

Then she arose and turned toward the window until she could command her emotion.

At last she said:

"I thank you, my man, and may God have mercy upon your poor sinful soul."

"He will, lady, if you ask it; but do not leave me for life is fast ebbing away, and I will not tire you long."

"Stay with me, lady, until I die."

The voice was pleading, the look entreating, and it touched Maud's heart, so she said:

"I will stay with you, poor fellow."

Then calling to Elizette, she continued:

"Bid my father not wait breakfast for me, for I will not be there."

Then she turned to soothe the last moments of the pirate, whose dying lips had sent such anguish into her heart by describing the commander of the outlaw schooner, for the description, even to the ring he wore, fitted exactly Bradford Carr.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE RETURN OF THE LADY MAUD.

SOFTLY, as an infant sinking to sleep, the wounded pirate's life-strings broke, and his spirit fluttered away.

Dark, dismal, remorseful indeed would have been the last hours of that man, had he died there alone with his thoughts all his own.

But, with Maud by him, her small hand softly touching his forehead, her voice soothing him, as her lips uttered prayers for mercy for the dying outlaw, he seemed to die content.

He had once been a gentleman, that was evident from his manner and language.

Once he had loved and been loved.

But he had fallen and gone lower and lower, until he branded himself with the name of pirate.

His past he would not speak of, his name he would not give, even to Maud.

"Let me rest in an unknown grave, let me be utterly forgotten," he had said.

Now and then his thoughts would wander, and he would speak several names in a tone of endearment.

At last he said faintly:

"Clasp my hand, lady, and ask God to receive my soul and cleanse it of its guilt, for it is about to slip life's cable now, and sail for the port beyond the Great River of Death."

Then in trumpet tones he sung out:

"Ho the lighthouse ahoy!"

"Light your lamp, keeper, that it may guide my spirit safe into port—ah! now it shines forth and I can steer clear of the breakers!"

"Ho, lads, let fall the anchor, for we—are—safe—in—port."

The last words were whispered and with their utterance his spirit fluttered away from the casket of clay in which it had so long been imprisoned.

Maud was deeply impressed, and sat for some moments still grasping the hand of the pirate.

Then she arose, called the negro man outside, who had been watching with the dying pirate, and walked slowly toward the mansion.

She gained her room unseen by her father, whom she heard talking with the doctor in the library, and found there a tempting hot breakfast which Elizette had brought for her.

A cup of coffee she forced herself to take, but could touch no food; and pacing to and fro, her thoughts were full of bitterness at what she had heard from the dying lips of the pirate.

Finding his patient dead, the easy-going country doctor, being coroner as well, held an inquest over the dead bodies, which were buried back in the forest.

Hardly had this work been finished, when a sail was sighted running in toward the harbor.

"It is the Lady Maud!"

"It is the lugger!"

"Massa Irving am coming back!" cried the negroes.

The sail came swiftly on, and in an hour's time ran into the harbor and dropped anchor.

Springing into a boat, Irving came ashore, and was greeted with a cheer by the slaves, and his father met him at the landing.

"Well, my son, I am glad to see you safe."

"Thank you, father; but I had a hot run of it, for the pirate sailed like a witch."

"I was coming into the harbor, when he ran out of a bayou and began chase; so I had to go to sea, as I feared he would play havoc here."

"I dropped him, however; made a wide circuit, and here I am."

"But what has happened here, for you are white as a ghost?"

"Your pirate friend came back here last night, and paid us a visit."

"What do you mean, father?"

In a few words, Colonel Brandt told his son all that had happened.

"And the Sea Fox came to your aid?"

"He did, most nobly."

"Well, he is a splendid fellow; and it must have been his vessel I saw flying along under all canvas just at dawn, and some of the men said that he was in chase of a craft ahead."

"I trust he may catch the rascal."

"But come, Irving; we have no time to lose, as I have determined to start for New Orleans."

"When do you leave, sir?"

"Within the hour, and we shall live there for the present, for I shall take what house-servants we need with us, and get a furnished house there; as to live here is certainly unsafe, in the present unsettled state of affairs."

"But, my son, do you know who commands the pirate schooner?"

"I saw a man in priest's robes on board, sir."

"Did you recognize him?"

"I understand what you mean, father, for you think he was Mr. Carr."

"He was about his size, but I could not see his face."

"Still, I know that Bradford Carr is not the man you take him to be, and I will yet prove that to you; but this affair last night must have been a great shock to sister?"

"It was; and you had better see her at once, while I get the luggage on board—for we must sail just after dinner."

Irving ran on up to the mansion, and his sister sprang to greet him as he entered her room.

"Oh, brother, brother! have you still faith in Bradford Carr?" she cried.

"Every time, sis, and I hope you are not losing faith."

"Irving, I have seen one who tells me that Bradford Carr is the commander of the pirate schooner."

"I would not believe him if he said so when he was dying."

"He was dying, Irving, for it was a wounded pirate left here by his comrades last night."

"He told me that his captain dressed as a priest, and was said to have been a tutor in a planter's family on this coast, while he was engaged to a young lady, an heiress."

"That he gave up all and went to piracy, and more, had a wife on board his vessel."

"I saw a woman on board, standing by his side, sis, and for that reason fired high at his rigging."

"The man also said that his captain was tall, well formed, strong as a lion, and what he had seen of his face, and described, answers the description of Bradford Carr."

"This looks bad, sis, but I don't believe yet Carr is the pirate."

"More, Irving, he told me that his captain had very small and shapely hands, and that he wore a plain gold ring, with a blood-red seal, in which was set a diamond."

"Whew! the very ring you gave Carr."

"Yes, Irving."

"This looks black; but I have got to see the man, not his priestly robes, hands and ring, to believe that it is Bradford Carr," was the plucky response.

"God bless you, brother, for your courage and faith bids me hope."

"Hope by all means, sis, for I don't give up the ship you can swear, if you did swear, until I know it has sunk."

"I trust Bradford Carr, no matter what has turned against him, and I intend to trust him on until I know he is guilty, and I'll take no suspicions and beliefs, but must see for myself."

"Bravo, brother, for you are a friend indeed, and you give joy to my heart."

"Yes, I will trust him too," and Maud's face lighted up as she set about preparations for her departure in the yacht.

CHAPTER XX.

THE TWO YACHTS.

FOR the first time since it had been a home, Brandt Villa looked desolate and dreary, as those who dwelt beneath its sheltering roof assembled upon the dock to depart for New Orleans.

The sun was near its setting, but its rays fell upon closed doors and windows, and an air of gloom seemed even before nightfall to be creeping over the scene.

Upon the dock stood four white persons amid a hundred blacks.

Those four were Colonel Brandt, Maud, Irving and the overseer of the plantation, who dwelt back among the negro-quarters, and was to be left in charge.

He was a gray-haired, sturdy man, with a kindly face, and said honestly:

"It hurts me to see you all go; but me and the blacks will take keer o' ther place, colonel, and fight ther pirirts if they attempts to burn the mansion."

"I know you will, Burley, and I leave all in your hands."

"Now farewell," and Colonel Brandt grasped the hard hand of the overseer.

Maud and Irvin also shook hands warmly with him, and then followed a leave-taking of all the faithful negroes gathered around, and the party stepped into the boat and were rowed on board the yacht, amid cries of good-by, waving of handkerchiefs, good wishes and weeping.

The house servants that were going with the family followed in another boat, and then the Lady Maud spread her white sails and sped out of the harbor before a fair breeze, just as the sun went down behind the horizon.

"Sail ho, Massa Irvin!"

The cry aroused Maud from a reverie, as she leaned over the taffrail gazing at the home she loved so well and which was growing fainter and fainter in the darkness that was creeping over land and sea.

Colonel Brandt was pacing the deck, smoking and thinking, and he started at the cry of the lookout.

Irving was busy with his vessel, and had no time for bitter thoughts, so called out with seamanlike promptness:

"Whereaway Sam?"

"She jist comed out o' that bayou, sah, round de big froest," answered the negro lookout.

Irving sprung for his glass, bent it a moment upon the strange sail, and cried in a voice that was heard throughout the yacht:

"It is the Lady Maud, as I am a living sinner!"

At once all was excitement, Maud awaking quickly to the situation, and coming to her brother's side, while Colonel Brandt seized the glass and turned it upon the vessel.

"Irving, you are right, for it is the Lady Maud," he said earnestly.

"Or was, father, for this is the Lady Maud now, and yonder runaway shall become her prize."

"See, she is heading seaward, and doubtless does not see us."

"I will stand on as I am until she gets an offing, and then, having the wind of her we can run her down."

"Do you think it advisable, my son, hampered as we are?" asked the colonel, glancing at Maud.

"Oh yes, sir, for we have the crew of twenty and with the servants and ourselves twenty-five men, and we can make a good fight."

"But she may have more."

"I do not think she is armed, father, and she will hardly carry more than a dozen men."

"If we find she is too strong for us we can run for it."

"If it is not too late, for I believe she is in pirate hands, and that she will meet a desperate lot."

"We can but see, father; but now, with the runaway yacht in full sight of us, it would not do to let her go without at least finding out what company she is sailed by."

"Well, Irving, you are brave and discreet with it, and I know, that with your sister on board, you will act for the best."

"Let us ask sis, and if she says no, I'll go my way in peace, father."

"Oh, sis!"

Maud walked forward and joined her father and brother, and the latter said:

"Sis Maud, we are holding a council of war, and we wish you to join us."

"Well, Irving?"

"Yonder craft is my runaway yacht."

"Yes, I have been watching her with my glass."

"I wish to go in chase, as soon as we get the wind of her, and between her and the land, and discover just what she is up to."

"Of course you should, brother, for it is not right to lose her, when perhaps you can capture her."

"Bravo for you, sis! I knew you would say so, and now, as we are in a good position I will spread all sail in chase."

Orders were at once given to rig the lugger-yacht in all the canvas she could stagger under, and she went flying along over the dark waters, directly down upon the runaway, which was bowling along seaward in fine style.

But the foe in her wake was soon sighted, and that it was a surprise, and a startling one, was very evident, by the movements of the craft, for she first put her helm hard down, as though to run back from whence she had come, and then headed quickly in an opposite direction.

Seeing that the lugger could cut them off, she then held on her course boldly out to sea, and Irving said grimly:

"Now I have her."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE PRIZE.

"AND you really think the lugger can out-sail the yacht, my son?" asked the colonel, as he stood by Irving's side, watching the chase.

"I know it, sir, especially before the wind as we are now going; see, they are putting up every stitch that will draw, and we will soon notice the result."

"She will doubtless resist desperately."

"I think not, father, for as she showed much fear at sight of us, it gives me an idea that she has very few on board to show resistance."

"I hope you are right, my son; but now she has all up she can set, and we'll soon know the result."

Anxiously all on board the lugger now watched the yacht ahead, and presently the negro mate called out:

"We is gainin', Massa Irving."

"You are right, Wood, we are gaining, and rapidly," answered Irving.

In a quarter of an hour more all could see that the lugger was outsailing the sloop, and Maud remarked:

"I would not believe the yacht could be out-run as she is."

"This is a fast craft, sis, and those who had her knew well that she had to have speed to save their lives."

"See, she looms up well now, and I'll soon toss a shot over her to bring her to, for I am anxious to know what my old favorite is up to—ha! that is music!"

The exclamation came from the fact that a bright flash suddenly illumined the stern of the sloop, and the boom of a cannon followed, while a solid shot flew wildly to one side of the lugger.

"A six-pounder," coolly said Irving.

"She may have a larger gun, my son."

"I guess not, father, or she would have fired it first."

"No, I think she has shown her strongest hand, and I do not believe she has more than a couple of six-pounders, so I will just send a shot from our long eighteen over him as a hint that we have the biggest teeth."

Two more shots now flashed upon the stern of the sloop, and the shots flew quite near the lugger.

"That shows his hand, I think, father; but they are dangerous, so please get sis below, while I answer his shots."

But Maud would not go into the cabin, saying firmly that she would not shun a danger her father and brother were forced to meet.

The long eighteen on the lugger was quickly loaded and Irving sighted and fired it.

The recoil made the little vessel shiver, and the roar of the gun seemed deafening, while the shot went shrieking furiously on its way.

The effect was watched with the deepest interest by all on board the lugger, and to their ears came a crashing of timbers which showed how well the gun had been aimed.

"Bravo, my son! you are a dead-shot with a cannon as well as with rifle and pistol," cried the colonel, while the negro mate said enthusiastically:

"Massa Irving sent him right whar he tell him ter go, sartin."

But the sloop still held on her way, and the long eighteen mounted on the bows of the lugger was again loaded and fired.

Again the crash of timbers followed, with loud orders and cries, and the sloop came swiftly around and lay to.

"We've got her," cried Irving, and he called to his crew to stand by and lower away a boat and for all to go thoroughly armed.

Running swiftly down upon the yacht, the lugger, when near, put her helm down and as she wore round, Irving hailed:

"Ho, the Lady Maud!"

"This hain't the Lady Maud," said a gruff voice.

"Ho, the yacht, then?"

"It hain't no yacht," came in the same sullen tones.

"Who and what are you then?" angrily asked the youth.

"An honest coaster on a trading cruise."

"So much the better for you, if you can prove it."

"Come on board and bring your papers!"

There was a silence of some minutes, and then the same voice said:

"We lost our papers in bringing 'em on board."

"So I thought; but come on board yourself."

"What vessel is that?"

"That you will find out when you board her."

"Come, lose no time!"

Some minutes more passed and then a boat put out from the vessel's side, and it contained four oarsmen, and a man in the stern.

As it came alongside the lugger, Irving said:

"Wood, make that boat fast," and then he turned to greet the man who came over the side.

He was a villainous-looking man, with a face that would have done full justice to a pirate, and eyed Irving and all on board in a savage kind of a way.

"Well, sir, give an account of yourself," said Irving.

"I told you what I was," was the sullen response.

"And I do not believe you, for I know that craft."

"What is she?"

"My own yacht, the Lady Maud, which was cut out from her anchorage in harbor some time ago by a band of pirates."

"I bought her in Orleans, and now am running trading voyages in her."

"Why were you coming out of an inlet on the coast, where no honest craft is ever seen?"

"I run in there to fill my water-casks."

"Whither are you bound?"

"To Orleans."

"With what cargo?"

The man was silent, and Irving continued:

"Well, you remain here until my return."

"Where are you going, young feller?"

"On board your vessel."

"I'll go with you."

"You'll do no such thing, but stay right here."

"But I will—"

"Wood, just throw this man in the hold if he gives you any trouble."

"Father, I will hail if I need aid," and Irving sprung into his boat, and his black oarsmen pulled him rapidly alongside the sloop.

As he boarded, he cast a quick glance over her, and saw but three or four men, while astern stood a woman.

The topsail had been cut away by one of his shots, and the other had dismounted one of the six-pounders, while a man lay dead beneath the wreck of the piece.

Walking aft he raised his tarpaulin and said politely, addressing the woman:

"Who is in command of this craft may I ask?"

"Her skipper is on board of yonder lugger," was the cold reply.

"Then I seize her as my prize, for I am confident that she is a lawless vessel."

"You have the power to do as you please, sir; but I, as a passenger, certainly am not to be considered your prisoner, nor my effects as your booty," haughtily said the woman.

"No, lady, you are not a prisoner, and I am no red robber to take that which belongs to you."

"This vessel is mine, was stolen from me, and I claim her now as my prize, while her crew must give an account of themselves to the Government, for I will surrender them upon my arrival in New Orleans."

"As my sister and father are on the lugger with me, you will find pleasanter quarters there."

"No, I prefer to remain here until we reach the city."

"As you please, lady," and turning away Irving called to the men on board to surrender themselves as prisoners, which they did with exceeding bad grace.

Then returning to the lugger he put the remainder of the crew of the sloop in irons, and leaving his father in command, he took charge of his prize, and the two vessels set sail side by side for the lake shore, from whence it was but a short drive across to New Orleans.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE TRAITOR SMUGGLER.

"MASSA IRVING, one of dem priz'ners says as how he'd like ter see yer, sah," said the negro mate on board the prize, to Irving Brandt, the morning after the capture of the sloop, and when the two vessels were sailing side by side, and heading for the lake shore, where a landing would be made to go to New Orleans.

"Bring him on deck then, Wood."

Massa Irving, he done whisper that ter me, and says he don't want to have nobody know 'bout it."

"Ah, that is it; well, Wood, I will go forward and you can bring him there, for the lady passenger is in the cabin."

The negro soon returned with the prisoner, a hard-faced man of forty, with a cunning look in his eyes, and the appearance of one whom it would be well to avoid.

"Well, sir, you wish to speak to me?" said Irving.

"I do, sir, but what I say I wish to sell," was the cool reply.

"Ah! you can tell something of importance then?"

"I can."

"Very well; I will signal my father to come on board and we will hear what you have to say."

"I have nothing to say unless I get my terms."

"We will see to that; here, Wood, lay to, while I hail the lugger."

The lugger was hailed and Colonel Brandt soon came on board the sloop, when Irving told him what the seaman had said.

"Well, my man, out with it, if you've got anything to tell," said the colonel.

"I've got plenty to tell; but my mouth is shut unless I get my terms."

"Name your terms then."

"I must be set free as soon as I get to the city and have a hundred dollars in gold."

"You prize your knowledge highly."

"It is worth more to you, sir."

"What do you say, Irving?" and the colonel turned to his son.

"I agree to his terms, sir."

"And I, so out with it, my man."

"Well, gentlemen, do you know just what this vessel is?"

"I suspect her of being a lawless craft now, and as she was stolen from me, and I find you on board, of course I look upon you as the thieves until you prove yourselves guiltless," said Irving.

"Yes; you were caught with stolen property, and hence you will have to suffer," added the colonel.

"Well, gentlemen, this craft is now a smuggler."

"Ha! you mean that?"

"Yes, sir, for she carries smuggled and piratical goods to Mobile, New Orleans and Pensacola to dispose of."

"This is indeed a valuable secret, my man, but tell us more," said the colonel.

"Well, sir, she was on her way to New Orleans when you caught her, and she has a rich cargo on board."

"I would like to know where she has it stored?" remarked Irving.

"There is a lady in the cabin?"

"Yes."

"She told you that she was on her way to New Orleans with her traps, her family having broken up housekeeping on the coast, and left her to bring the household effects?"

"So she said."

"She further told you that she had intended to go in a coaster, but it not appearing, and this yacht being sighted, was signaled, and she engaged the skipper to take her and her traps."

"Yes, that is what she told me."

"Well, young sir, she has told you a pack of lies, for her trunks are filled with laces, silks and other rich fabrics, while she also has silver plate, jewels and many articles of value."

"All smuggled?" cried Colonel Brandt in amazement.

"Worse than that, the greater part of them."

"How worse?"

"They are the booty gotten under the black flag."

"Ha! she is leagued with pirates then?"

"Just examine her trunks and you would think so."

"And smugglers too?"

"Oh, yes, she is a clever hand at the work."

"I believed her story and promised to let her go free, with her baggage, when we reached port," said Irving.

"Oh, yes, her bright eyes and winning ways would turn older heads than yours, young sir."

"But who is she?"

"Her name was Rita Restel."

"Ah! there is a famous smuggler by that name?"

"Yes, sir, the Sea Owl they call him."

"That is the man; but what is she to him?"

"His daughter."

"Indeed! I deemed her a lady."

"Oh, yes, she would fool any one, and she is a lady in manners and education, and a handsome one, too."

"And she is smuggling for her father?"

"Well, sir, more for her husband now."

"Her husband?"

"Yes, sir."

"She is married then?"

"She is."

"And who is her husband?"

"Have you heard of a crew afloat of late who are winning the name of Ghouls of the Sea?"

"Ah! that is the name they give the Pirate Priest and his crew."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, what of him?"

"He is her husband."

"The Pirate Priest is the husband of the woman now on board this yacht?" asked Colonel Brandt in utter amazement.

"Yes, sir, and she only left his vessel night before last to run this cargo into the city, and I tell you it is a rich one."

"And where is the Pirate Priest now?"

"After meeting this yacht at night and putting his wife and booty on board, he started on a cruise along the coast to sack some of the houses of the rich planters."

"By Heaven, but you are right there, for he paid us a visit, but got beaten off."

"He had a large crew to be beaten off, sir."

"Well, he was driven back; but tell me what you know of this Pirate Priest."

"Mighty little, sir."

"What is his real name?"

"I do not know, sir."

"How long have you known him?"

"Not very long, for he only lately took command of the schooner; but he is a terrible man in his way and shows little mercy."

"Describe him, please."

"A tall, handsome man, superbly formed, possessing wonderful strength, and with dark eyes that seem to look clean through you."

"Bradford Carr's description to a dot, Irving," cried Colonel Brandt.

"It is not a bad description of Mr. Carr, father; but there are many men in the world who must resemble him."

"Foolish boy, to still cling to the idea that Bradford Carr is not the Pirate Priest."

"I shall cling to that idea, father, until I know that he is the Pirate Priest," was the reply of the youth.

"Well, my man, you have given us some valuable information indeed," and Colonel Brandt turned to the seaman.

"It is worth what I asked then, sir?"

"Yes."

"And you will set me free as soon as you reach port, and give me the gold I ask?"

"Yes."

"I am satisfied, sir, only do not let any of my messmates, or the captain's wife think I told on 'em."

"No, we will give out the idea that you escaped, and will give you the means to get away."

"Now, Irving, let Wood take this man below decks, while we go and interview that beautiful Sabaness in the cabin," and Colonel Brandt walked aft with the air of a man who had disagreeable work on hand.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE PIRATE'S WIFE.

IN the cabin of the captured sloop sat a woman lost in deep meditation.

Ever and anon she would bite her full red lips as though in anger, and a scowl would cross her well-arched brows.

She was well-dressed and looked the lady.

But the reader has seen her before in the person of Rita Restel, the daughter of the smuggler captain.

Presently steps resounded overhead and a moment after two persons entered the cabin.

They were Colonel Brandt and Irving.

"Madam, this is my father, Colonel Brandt," said Irving by way of introduction.

The woman arose and bowed politely, while she said in her soft, melodious voice:

"I am happy to meet you, sir, and would like to tell you how kindly your son has treated me in the very awkward position in which I was placed through taking passage on this strange vessel."

"My son, madam, could treat a woman only in kindness; but it is his painful duty, as well as mine, to let you know that we are aware of just who you are," said the colonel sternly.

"Sir! I do not understand you," responded the woman haughtily.

"I will explain, madam."

"Pray do so, sir."

"I am sorry to have to doubt your word when you say that you are the daughter of a planter on the lower coast, on your way to New Orleans, but we know that you are no such thing."

"Sir, you are insulting," and the woman's eyes flashed, while her face became very pale.

"It is far from my intention, madam, to offer insult to any one; but knowing you as I do, and—"

"Pray, what do you know of me?"

"That you are the daughter of Restel, the Sea Owl."

"Can you prove what you say?" and the woman became perfectly calm now.

"Yes, madam, and more."

"What more?"

"That you are the wife of the Pirate Priest." She winced at this, and Colonel Brandt saw it; but he continued:

"Neither my son or myself, madam, care to make war upon women; but we know that your trunks are filled with smuggled goods, and booty gained by piracy, and that we shall lay claim to."

"And what will you do with me?" said the woman, her voice quivering, now that she saw concealment was useless.

"You will be free to go your way upon our arrival in port."

"You are kind, sir; but some traitor has brought this upon me," and she fairly hissed the last words, while her eyes flashed revengefully.

To this Colonel Brandt made no reply, and Irving asked:

"Will you kindly answer me one question, madam?"

"Yes, if in my power."

"Of course you know the name of the man to whom you are married?"

She smiled at this, and said simply:

"Naturally."

"Will you tell me his name?"

"Your father said awhile since that he knew me to be the wife of the Pirate Priest."

"And it is his name that I would like to find out?"

"For what reason?"

"To discover if he is the one he is accused of being."

"You would know his name?"

"Yes, if you please."

"My husband's name is Bradford Carr," she said quietly.

"By Heaven! I believe it."

"Now, my son, what have you to say more in behalf of your tutor?" cried Colonel Brandt triumphantly.

It was evident that Irving was staggered.

He turned deadly pale; but he kept his eyes fixed upon the woman's face in a way that caused her to feel uncomfortable.

Then he said quietly:

"I still hold faith in Bradford Carr, father, in spite of what has just been said."

CHAPTER XXIV.

PALAFIX AND MYRTLE.

UPON the arrival of the lugger, and her prize, in the lake, Irving Brandt found himself quite a hero, as soon as it became known that he had recaptured his stolen vessel, and in doing so had taken a valuable lot of booty, and a crew of desperate men.

He went with his father to the Government head-quarters, to make his report; but neither the woman or the man who had turned traitor were spoken of as being in league with the smugglers.

These two were released as soon as the yacht arrived, while the more unfortunate of the crews were turned over to the authorities.

A constant stream of vehicles was going out to the lake shore from the city, all being anxious to see the two vessels, and Irving was bored to death to have to tell over and over again the story of the stealing of the yacht, and her recapture by the lugger.

In the mean time, Colonel Brandt had found a furnished house for rent in the city, and thither had gone with Maud and the servants, while Irving remained on the lugger with his sable crew, until the Government officials decided what should be done with the captured yacht.

One day, among his visitors announced by Wood, as Irving sat in his little cabin, was a clerical-looking gentleman, accompanied by a young girl.

There was something attractive in the appearance of the man, showing that he was no ordinary person; while the young girl was very beautiful in face, and just budding into maidenhood, for she was about fourteen; her form was one of exquisite grace.

Irving glanced into the face of the gentleman first, but failing to recognize him, though he felt that he had met him before, he then turned his gaze upon the young girl, and, with an exclamation of pleasure, sprang to her side.

"Oh, Myrtle, how glad I am to see you! and how beautiful you have grown!" he cried, with a frankness that caused her to blush.

Then grasping the hand of her escort, he continued:

"And I know you now, Captain Palafox, although I failed to recognize you at first, with your very demure look and clerical dress."

"But be seated, both of you, for I am ever so glad to see you."

Captain Palafox, the Sea Fox, for he it was, threw himself into a chair, while Irving led Myrtle to a seat, and called to Wood to bring wine and refreshments for his guests.

"Well, Master Irving, you are becoming quite a hero, are you not?" said the Sea Fox, pleasantly.

"Well, captain, I retook my yacht, and got a rich haul of booty with her; but I do not know that I deserve any credit for it, as the lugger outsailed the sloop, and my crew outnumbered her men."

"Ever modest, Master Irving."

"But, tell me, do you know aught of the Ghouls of the Sea?"

"You mean the Pirate Priest?"

"Yes; your old tutor, Bradford Carr."

"Captain Palafox, I do not believe that Bradford Carr is the Pirate Priest," said Irving earnestly.

The captain shook his head, and answered:

"I did not know Mr. Carr as well as you did, Irving, for I only saw him at his trial, and afterward when I aided him to escape; but I am confident that the man I saw on the deck of the Ghouls of the Sea, as he calls his schooner, and whom I met face to face in his priestly garb the night of the fight on your lawn, was none other than the tutor."

"I cannot believe it, Captain Palafox, until I see him with my own eyes; but let me thank you for your very noble work in defending our home the other night."

"It was an act of friendship I cannot forget, any more than my father and sister can understand."

The pirate captain smiled, and answered:

"I would not see your home robbed, and perhaps worse done, Irving, when I could prevent it."

"But how was it that you happened so opportunely upon the scene?"

"I was in my schooner watching for the Ghouls of the Sea, when one of my men, acting as a spy, reported that the Pirate Priest intended raiding your home."

"I wrote a note of warning, and carried it myself to your sister, meeting also your father, and upon my way back to my vessel, I sighted the pirate schooner in chase of you."

"Watching her, I saw her put back, when you were dropping her with this flying lugger of yours, and I felt confident that Brandt Plantation was his destination."

"My schooner lay in the bayou undergoing repairs, so I could not take her; but took half of my crew in boats, and headed the Pirate Priest off by getting first to the mansion and lying in ambush for him."

"My men reported that he met the Lady Maud, your sloop yacht, and that the two lay alongside of each other for some time."

"Then he sailed for your harbor, and the result you know, for we took him so by surprise that his men became demoralized."

"Well, captain, you served me and mine well, I assure you; but have you been able to find out anything more about this pirate?"

"Only, as I told you, that I am convinced that he is Bradford Carr, and that he spares no one, and with his crew they are properly named Ghouls of the Sea."

"I have heard that he is wholly merciless."

"He is, Master Irving."

"Well, that is not the nature of Mr. Carr."

"Circumstances alter the natures of men, Master Irving, making tigers out of lambs."

"I do not believe it of Mr. Carr."

"I hope your faith in him will be warranted; but as I tell you, I do not doubt his identity as the man who has hoisted the Cutlass and Cross flag over his decks, and dresses in the garb of a priest."

"Why, who else could it be?"

"That question I cannot answer," moodily responded Irving.

"And, Master Irving, let me tell you that there is a woman in the case, for there is a fair lady on board the Ghoul of the Sea, whose appearance, as well as I could judge, did not indicate that she was a captive."

"I know of her, sir, and in confidence will tell you of her," and Irving told the Sea Fox of the presence on board the yacht of the woman who was the wife of the pirate chief, and also how one of the crew had betrayed the secret of what the vessel really was.

He made no secret either of what the woman had said, as to the name of her husband being Bradford Carr.

"And still you doubt, Master Irving?"

"Yes, still I doubt, and so will continue, until I see him face to face myself, and know that he has fallen so low as to be the merciless wretch they call the man who commands the schooner Ghoul of the Sea; but Myrtle, let me congratulate you upon your improvement," and Irving turned to the young girl.

"Thank you, Master Irving, for the compliment; but I am in an atmosphere now where I cannot help but improve."

"Yes, Myrtle is studying hard, and will make a splendid woman, and I have assured her that her father is no longer a pirate, Master Irving, as now my duty is to simply hunt down and capture the Ghoul of the Sea."

"When that schooner is my prize, and the mystery solved regarding her commander, then I will leave the sea forever, and devote my life to my dear little girl."

"I have sinned deeply in breaking the laws of every land, I have done many a wrong; but circumstances drifted me into the tide of piracy, and now I shall steer clear of the breakers, and lead a different life, for my own sake as well as for Myrtle's."

Palafox spoke impressively, and Myrtle stepped quickly to his side and kissed him, for the ignominy of her father's life in the past had dawned upon her in all its enormity, when she left his vessel, his retreat in the bayous on the coast, to go to a fashionable school in the city, and live among people of honor.

Wood now entering with refreshments, the conversation was changed, and soon after Captain Palafox and Myrtle took their leave, and Irving Brandt was left alone to dream of the beautiful young face that he loved so dearly to look upon.

CHAPTER XXV.

MAUD'S VISITORS.

THE house selected by Colonel Brandt for his temporary residence in New Orleans, was a handsome structure in a fashionable part of the city.

It had ample grounds about it, with flower-gardens, shady nooks and arbors, so that Maud was not confined to the house, and had considerable freedom outdoors, if not the scenery, lawn and grand forests of the plantation.

With her riding-horse and society, and household duties, she did not expect to find time hanging heavily upon her hands.

The colonel seemed contented there too; but Maud felt anxious about him, now that he would be exposed to the temptations of the city.

True, she had helped him out of desperate places, by self-sacrifice, into which he had gotten himself by his mad infatuation for gambling, and she had his solemn pledges never again to go to the gaming-table.

But would he have the courage to resist, was her constant fear.

The Government soon settled the affair of the yacht, which Irving had captured, by returning him his property and the booty, and then offering to buy the sloop and turn her into a revenue cutter, which would be useful on the Gulf shores.

More pleased with the lugger than the sloop, as he knew her speed was greater, Irving accepted the offer, and leaving it to his father to settle the business, set sail in the Lady Maud to see if all went well at the plantation, and, with the hope in his heart that he could find out something regarding Bradford Carr.

The day of his departure, when Maud returned home, after having ridden out to the lake to see him set sail, she found two visitors just about to leave, as the negro butler had told them she might not be back for some time.

Her father had escorted her as far as the gate, and then ridden on down-town, so that Maud met her guests alone.

Had any one seen the meeting, and known just who these visitors were, they would have deemed it passing strange that the belle and heiress, Miss Maud Brandt, could thus welcome the famous Sea Fox and his daughter.

But Maud had not forgotten how the Sea Fox had set her free, when she was captured by his private lieutenant, nor that to the Sea Fox she owed it that Bradford Carr had not died upon the gallows for a crime of which he was not guilty.

She remembered too how he had pledged himself to find out if Bradford Carr was really the Ghoul of the Sea, and that she owed it to the Sea Fox that her home had not been sacked and herself carried off the night the pirates landed, and were so bravely met upon the farm by foes they little dreamed to meet.

Through Maud, Myrtle had been placed at Madam Chotard's fashionable boarding school, though not the shadow of a suspicion had fallen that the beautiful young girl was the daughter of a pirate.

Owing as he did his life to Irving Brandt, Captain Palafox was most willing to do all in his power for all of the name of Brandt.

Strange to say, though the youth had visited his retreat, and so had Maud, though the mother and sister had sought him to beg that he save Bradford Carr from being hanged, and again asked him to seek the young tutor and discover if he was really the Pirate Priest, the secret had been well kept, for neither Maud or Irving knew that the other had ever met the Sea Fox, and knowing that each of them would prefer to have their acquaintance with him unknown, he was not the man to betray them.

After greeting her visitors warmly, Maud said:

"Now, Myrtle, we have come to the city to live until these terrible times are over, when we can again dwell at the dear old plantation, so I shall expect to see you often."

"You must meet my father and brother, and I would not be at all surprised if Irving fell in love with you, Myrtle, when he sees you."

"But, Captain Palafox, let me thank you for your brave defense of our home that night."

"Do not speak of it, Miss Brandt, for I did only my duty, knowing as I did that your home was to be attacked."

"Still, sir, you have my deepest gratitude; but when did you arrive in the city?"

"Some days ago."

"And, may I ask, if you have made any discovery in regard to—"

"You mean the Ghoul of the Sea?"

"I mean Mr. Carr."

"I tried to get back to my schooner, Miss Brandt, the night he landed at your house, in time to pursue him; but I was undergoing repairs, and it took me some time to get to sea."

"I, however, gave chase, but lost him in a storm, and hearing that he was cruising in the lakes, I ran to a secret hiding-place of mine, and came on to the city to see what I could learn from incoming vessels about him, and also to get me a supply of ammunition."

"And you suspect that this Ghoul of the Sea is Mr. Carr?" asked Maud in a low tone.

"I am almost convinced of it, Miss Brandt."

"Yet I cannot believe it, sir, and my brother Irving strengthens me in my faith, for he will not hear to it that his dearly loved tutor can be the merciless being that this pirate is said to be."

"For your sake, Miss Brandt, I hope that the Ghoul of the Sea may not prove to be Mr. Carr; but I cannot let you hope, for I believe that they are one and the same."

"But now I must leave you, for I have work to do, and in a few days will be again upon the track of this man, whoever he may be, and then the secret will be known, when I capture him."

"One minute, captain, I beg of you," eagerly cried Maud.

"Well, Miss Brandt?" said the man, impressed by her earnest manner.

"If you should capture him, for my sake set him free, and tell him to go his way and sin no more."

"You mean should the Ghoul of the Sea prove to be Mr. Carr?"

"Yes."

"I will do as you ask, Miss Brandt, though he will richly deserve swinging at the yard-arm."

"And now let me thank you for what you have done for my little girl, and beg that you will see her now and then, for she loves you most devotedly."

"I will do all in my power, sir, for Myrtle, and as I said, will get the madam to let her visit me here."

"Do not compromise yourself, Miss Brandt, in any way, I pray you, for Myrtle is, after all, but a pirate's daughter," and Captain Palafox spoke with some bitterness.

"What she was, has nothing to do with what she is, sir, and I will not compromise myself by doing right," was Maud's response, and soon after her visitors took their leave, Captain Palafox returning Myrtle to her school and then seeking the haunts where he knew he would be most likely to hear any news floating about regarding the movements of the Ghoul of the Sea.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE BROKEN PLEDGE.

HAMPERED as he was by the wills left by his father and wife, Colonel Brandt had to live within a certain income, which they, knowing his infatuation for gambling, had allowed him.

It was certainly liberal enough had it not been for the drafts upon it for gambling debts, and these kept the colonel in constant hot water, so to speak.

With a supervision of the property of his children, and the world being in ignorance of how his hands were tied as regarded the estate, it was universally believed that Colonel Brandt was a very rich man, and he was not one to correct such belief.

His vices had nearly wrecked him several times, and Maud's engagement to Soule Ravelle, and afterward to Barton Keys, had both been a sacrifice on her part to save her father from ruin, for his debts contracted at the card-table, had placed him wholly in their power.

With her knowledge of how often he had erred, and broken his pledges not to play any more, it is not to be wondered at, that Maud felt considerable anxiety regarding him, when they went to the city to live.

She watched him closely each day, and so well now could she read his face, that she would have been able to tell had he broken faith and returned to his gambling madness again.

As the days went by and he seemed even cheerful at night, when he sat in his library reading, or talking with her, if there were no visitors present, she gathered hope, and tried to appear happy herself, though the ever-present thought of Bradford Carr drove even contentment from her heart.

"Where are you going, father?" she asked one afternoon, as she saw her father hastily leaving the library.

He turned quickly, and said:

"Ah, my child, I thought that you were away riding, for William said so, and I left word with him that I was going down to the navy quarters and might not return until late."

Maud knew that her father was attending to the sale of the yacht for Irving, so said in reply:

"I will sit up for you, father, so do not remain very late."

The colonel kissed her affectionately, mounted his horse and rode down into town.

There he met several boon companions, who insisted that he should return and dine with them late that afternoon, and promising to do so, he rode on to the navy quarters which were below the city.

A chat with the officers for a while, and a few toasts put him in excellent humor, which was added to when the mail came in from Washington with orders to pay for the yacht, arm her and put her at once in commission.

The money was then promptly paid to the colonel, who gave his receipt for it, and then, with the snug sum in his pocket he wended his way back to the city.

The colonel's wisest course would have been to at once deposit the money for Irving; but trusting in his own strength, he kept it about him, and kept his engagement to dine with his convivial friends.

The dinner passed off most pleasantly, and, washed down by numerous bottles of rare old wine, it put all in a most gleeful mood, and when one proposed to go to the Palace of Chance for an hour or two, not even Colonel Brandt objected, for he felt that he could resist all temptations after what he had suffered in the past.

To the Palace of Chance then the gay party went, a convivial quartette of wealthy planters, with the exception of the colonel, who, however, was looked upon as the richest man of the four.

First one, and then another, and a third, tried his luck against the fickle goddess of fortune, and with varied success.

But at last the trio of gamblers began to lose steadily, and turning to Colonel Brandt they urged him to play.

"I have about given up card-playing," he said hesitatingly.

"Nonsense, Brandt, try your luck, for it cannot be that fortune can be against all four of us to-night."

"I would rather not," said the colonel.

"Oh, yes, do play and redeem our losses," cried one.

"If you have no money with you, Brandt, my purse is at your service," said another.

"Thank you, Mercer, but I have ample money with me, if I cared to play."

"I wish you would, just to show them that fortune has not wholly deserted the party."

"Come, here is a fifty, cover it, Mercer, and you, Townsend, and you, Merrill."

"Now, colonel, put your fifty upon it and we leave the result in your hands."

Colonel Brandt trembled, and wavered.

He remembered his pledge to Maud, and he well knew his weakness.

But he felt that a game or two would do little harm.

He would risk fifty dollars of his own money, for he had several hundred in his pocket that belonged to him, and there he would stop.

Surely luck could not turn against the four and he must win, he thought.

Then he needed some money and did not wish to ask Maud or Irving for it, as it might arouse their suspicions that he was gambling again.

"Well, I'll try and redeem the credit of our party," he said in a voice that had a quiver in it, when he knew how wrong he was doing.

Then the money was placed upon the table, the game was played and the colonel won.

Cheered by his success he doubled the amount and again won.

Thus fell fortune upon him until he was a large winner, and, intoxicated by his good fortune, he bet all that he had won upon the turn of a card, and lost.

He was staggered by this, and now, thoroughly in the whirlpool, he risked the money paid him for the yacht, and that too was swept away.

Maddened by his losses, and thirsting to retrieve them, he borrowed from one friend, and then another, and another, until each one had given him all he had with him, and anxiously begged him to desist.

But no, once launched into the intoxication of gambling Colonel Brandt was no man to give up while fortune was against him, and his notes were promptly cashed by the proprietor of the gambling-saloon, who knew him well, and it was just as promptly lost, until at last he was forced from the Palace of Chance, having lost his money, and with debts staring him in the face to an amount of many thousands of dollars.

Half dazed, and full of remorse, he wended his way homeward, his horse going along at a slow walk.

It was nearly dawn when he called up the sleepy groom and threw him the bridle-rein of his horse.

"Is Miss Maud up yet?" he asked in a frightened kind of way.

"No, massa, Missy Maud done gone out to stay all night wid a sick lady what sent for her," answered the negro.

"Thank God!" ejaculated the conscience-haunted man, as he hastily entered the house and sought his room, where he threw himself upon his bed and tossed about in an agony of spirit, for sleep would not visit his eyes.

CHAPTER XXVII. A DOUBLE SIN.

It was late when Colonel Brandt arose the following morning, and he was glad to learn that his daughter had returned, but had given orders that she was not to be called, as she had been up all night nursing her sick friend.

Breakfasting in haste the colonel hastened down town, a hopeful expression on his face.

The fact was he had hit upon a plan to pay the gambling debts contracted the night before.

What that plan was will soon be developed to the reader.

It certainly was not a creditable one to him, but desperate cases needed desperate remedies he well knew, and, the rich man he was supposed to be, he was well aware that there was no reason why he should not pay back that morning the money borrowed from his friends the night before, while in the evening he had to pay the sums due the proprietors of the Palace of Chance.

His steps led him to a part of the city that was by no means fashionable; but he little cared for that, urgent as was the need he had for going there.

At last he turned into a store that had the appearance of being an old curiosity-shop, for there was almost everything to be seen in it that one could wish to buy in the way of dry-goods, clothing, and household effects.

"Is Mr. Samuels in?" he asked of a clerk.

"That is Mr. Samuels, sir," and the clerk pointed to a man who had just entered the door.

He was a short, shrewd-faced man, with the look of one who could hold his own well in a bargain.

Seeing the distinguished-looking gentleman who had asked for him, he turned and said politely:

"You desire to see me, I believe, sir."

"Yes, I am Colonel Brandt."

"Ah, the father of Master Irving Brandt, with whom I have dealings."

"Yes, and he requested that I should call and see you upon the matter, for he expected you would have valued the goods by this time."

"I have, sir, for the work was completed yesterday and a hard task it was."

"Why there was everything there, from a bracelet to a Spanish shawl and French wines; the cargo must have come from a score of vessels."

"And probably did, sir, for as my son doubt-

less told you, it comprised the booty that the pirate known as the Ghoul of the Sea was sending to this city to be sold, as well as the goods that had been smuggled in by various vessels."

"The Government turned the booty over to him, I believe, as he was entitled to it as a prize?"

"Yes, and not only gave my son back his yacht, but also bought her from him at a round price, paying the money to him for her only last evening."

"But what value, Mr. Samuels, do you place on the goods my son gave you?"

"Here is the list, sir, which he gave me, and my valuation is marked opposite to each article."

Colonel Brandt took the list and glanced over it, while his eyes sparkled with pleasure.

"It amounts to a good round sum, Mr. Samuels."

"Yes, sir."

"And you purchase at these valuations?"

"I am willing to do so."

"Then we may as well close the bargain now."

"I am willing, Colonel Brandt, for I can find immediate sale for some of the things, if you are satisfied with the prices I offer."

"I am, sir, for my son could hardly expect to realize more."

"You will receipt for your son, sir, and I suppose you have an order from him, for although I know that it is all right, still business is business, sir!"

"Certainly, Mr. Samuels, you are right, and—why could I have come off and left that order at home?"

"I must have done so, sir, and I will return and get it, for my son has gone to the plantation and will not return for a couple of weeks."

Colonel Brandt was greatly in hopes that Mr. Samuels would waive the little piece of paper, which he said he had left at home; but Mr. Samuels was thoroughly a business man, and would not depart from his rules, so the planter hastened homeward.

Arriving in the library, however, he seemed in no hurry whatever.

His face was deadly pale, and locking the door he paced to and fro, his lips set, his hands clasped behind his back.

At last he glanced at his watch, started, and took a seat at his desk.

Twice he took up a quill pen and laid it down again.

But at length he wrote a few lines, and then tore them up.

Again he wrote a few lines, and these shared the same fate.

A third time he wrote, and then seizing what he had written folded up the paper and left the room.

"Is your mistress up yet, Ellizette?" he asked, as he met the maid in the hall.

"Yes, massa, missy am up, and gone again to see poor Missy Defoe, for they sent for her again, sah, and she told me to tell you she'd likely stay all night, sah, if Missy Defoe didn't die! but are you sick, massa?"

"No!" said the colonel, bluntly, and he left the house and wended his way again to the store of Mr. Samuels.

"Here is the order, Mr. Samuels," he said, producing the lines he had written.

The man glanced at them and said simply:

"Colonel Brandt, please write a receipt on the back of this order for seventeen thousand, four hundred and nine dollars, for that is just the sum due your son."

The colonel wrote as directed, received the money and departed from the store.

Wending his way to the hotel where his three planter friends were stopping, he met them, paid his debts to them, and reckless at his success, invited them to drive with him and afterward to go to the Palace of Chance with him.

The invitation was promptly accepted, one of the trio remarking:

"You are a lucky fellow, Brandt, to be able to lose what you did last night, and have plenty of ammunition to go and seek revenge to-night."

But he little dreamed how desperate were the thoughts at that moment of the man to whom he spoke, and whom he envied.

CHAPTER XXVIII. A SIN TO HIDE A SIN.

In a reckless kind of way, Colonel Brandt enjoyed his dinner, with his three friends, only he drank much more than was his wont, for he was not a man to imbibe deeply.

After dinner, and while the lights were being lighted in the stores, the four friends strolled along the streets, their steps directed toward the Palace of Chance.

It was an early hour in that fashionable resort of sin, for its frequenters were not wont to drop in until a later hour.

But the party sat down to a game of cards among themselves, in which the stakes ran high.

From the very outset the colonel was a winner, and his three friends had lost heavily by the time the *salon* was opened to the general public.

Flushed with his success, the colonel stepped up to the keeper and took up his notes of the previous night, remarking pleasantly:

"I suppose if I go broke to-night, I can borrow from the bank?"

"I will be glad to lend you any amount, colonel," said the keeper, thinking, with others, that the planter was an immensely rich man.

Then the game was begun with a large stake laid down by the colonel.

But already had his luck changed, for the keeper raked it in.

Another stake of a similar amount followed another, and a third was not far behind.

Thus the game went on, the colonel losing steadily, until again he was swept clean of money, and had again to borrow.

And borrow he did, until long after midnight he left the *salon*, white-faced, stern, and a desperate man.

Outwardly he was perfectly calm, but inwardly he seemed on fire, so did his heart and brain burn.

He had lost the four thousand dollars received for the yacht, and the fourteen thousand and odd dollars, which Samuels had paid him for the booty.

And more, he had borrowed from the gambler's bank four thousand dollars.

"Twenty-five thousand dollars in debt, and not a dollar to pay it with!"

"The four thousand must be paid to-morrow, and I dare not tell Irving, who may return at any time, that I have squandered twenty-one thousand dollars of his money."

"He, too, exacted a pledge from me not to gamble, and the secret would come out."

"I am ruined—yes, utterly ruined, and—Hal! I dare not think of that, for I am afraid to die, and I am afraid to face my children."

"I will go home and think."

He reached home, to find that Maud was still away, and had come late that afternoon for an hour's rest, and had taken Ellizette back with her.

Passing his daughter's room, he saw the lamp burning brightly within, and he stepped in the door to put it out, when his eyes fell upon Maud's jewel-box lying open on the table before him.

He started as though he had seen an adder before him, and gazed at them with dilated eyes.

In that box he knew was a treasure.

There were jewels Maud's mother and two grandmothers had worn, and many a costly trinket which had been presented to the maiden herself.

Then there was jewelry there which Soule Ravelle had left her, and better still, he beheld as he gazed, a small bag of gold, with a roll or two of bank-notes.

With an eager cry he sprang forward, seized the jewels and money, and fled from the room, muttering to himself:

"I have a fortune here, yes, a fortune here."

Strange to say, after hiding away his ill-gotten treasure, Colonel Brandt sunk to sleep.

Maud returned home early the following morning, after closing the eyes of her dead friend, and utterly worn out, she and Ellizette sunk down to rest.

It was nearly noon when Maud awoke, and Ellizette was still slumbering upon her cot.

Then her eyes fell upon the open casket, and she uttered a cry that awoke the quadron in a fright.

"Oh, lady! Missy Maud, what is the matter?" cried Ellizette.

"Ellizette, I have been robbed."

"Robbed, missy?"

"Yes, I came back, after leaving the room last night, and threw my jewelry in this box, which I negligently left on the table."

"See! there is nothing here whatever."

"All, all are gone!" and Maud's voice quivered.

Then she said:

"Quick, Ellizette, bid my father come here."

The colonel soon arrived, pale and excited, for the quadron had told him all.

He seemed astounded at the tidings, and then said:

"Maud, my child, this is fearful; but do not speak of this robbery, for I am confident it is none of the servants."

"Leave the matter with me, and I will tell the officers of the law and they will go secretly to work to ferret out the thief."

"You know best, father, so do as you desire; but it is fearful to feel that they are lost, for I prized many of them so highly, as souvenirs that had belonged to my dear old grandmothers, and poor mamma."

"It is terrible, Maud; but I feel confident that you will get them again, and I will go down at once to the chief officer of the city guard and place the matter before him," and Colonel Brandt soon after left the house.

Going to a down-town hotel he ordered a room, and said that he expected some visitors, who were to be at once shown up.

It was a common thing in those days for city residents to take a room in a hotel, for a game of cards with friends, or a wine-party, and so nothing was thought of the colonel's doing so.

Once in his room, however, he drew from beneath his cloak a large bundle, which, upon being opened displayed a suit of clothes, a false beard, and a wig of black hair, with a slouch hat.

These the colonel soon rigged himself out in, and no one would ever have recognized the elegant looking man of a few moments before, in his new costume.

Leaving the room, and placing the key in his pocket, he went boldly out of the hotel and walked toward the Spanish quarter of the town.

At last he turned into a dingy-looking store, over the door of which hung a sign upon which was painted in faded letters:

"RUDOLPHO,

"Dealer in Gold, Silver, Jewels, and General Merchandise.

"MONEY LOANED, AND ODDS AND ENDS PURCHASED."

"This is the place," muttered the disguised colonel, and he walked up to a man who was standing near an inner door that was open, as though he might be talking to some one in the next room, and at the same time keeping an eye upon the shop.

"Are you Rudolpho?" asked the colonel.

"I am; who are you?" was the abrupt reply.

"I am a man in need of money."

"What have you to sell?"

"Nothing; I wish to borrow."

"On your face?"

"No, on articles I have with me," and the colonel was keeping his temper only by the greatest effort.

"What are the things you offer?"

"Jewels and gold trinkets."

"Let me see them."

Colonel Brandt unrolled the things which he had so cleverly kidnapped the night before, and spread them out before the astonished eyes of the man.

"Whew! you must be a returned pirate, disposing of your share of the booty," said the man Rudolpho.

Colonel Brandt's wrath could hardly be kept under, and he said hotly:

"I came here to ask a legitimate loan of you, not to be insulted."

"Ah, I beg pardon, sir; what do you wish on this little treasure?"

"I need thirty thousand dollars, on one year's time, and I will pay you twenty per cent. interest."

"I will give you the sum, but you must pay thirty per cent."

"It is too much."

"Then go where you can get better terms."

"No, I will pay your price; but keep the jewels in this case, which I will lock before you and retain the key."

"One minute, please; I wish a witness to this."

"Here, captain!"

At the call a man came from the inner room. He was dressed in sailor garb, his face was heavily bearded, and he wore a tarpaulin that was pulled down to shelter his eyes.

He made no reply, but simply bent over and looked at the jewels.

"Captain, I lend this man thirty thousand on these jewels, and on one year's time."

"He pays me thirty per cent. and locks the box and keeps the key."

"Just glance over the things so you can see what is there."

The man addressed as captain did so and said simply:

"All right, Rudolpho."

"Well, sir, here is your money, and in one year you can get the things, or sooner if you wish."

He took from a large iron box a roll of bills, and counted out the large sum of money into the trembling hand of Colonel Brandt, the witness standing quietly by and looking on the while.

Placing the bills in his pocket, Colonel Brandt left the dingy shop, while the witness turned to the money-lender and said:

"Rudolpho, I will give you the value of those jewels to hold as security, and a snug sum for the loan of them for a short while."

"But what do you wish with them, captain?"

"I wish to borrow them for a particular purpose."

"Mind you, I will return them just as they are, for I only desire to gain a certain point by having them in my possession."

"All right, captain; but don't lose them, for they are worth a cool fifty thousand, as I saw at a glance, if he does not come to redeem them."

"Now let us continue our talk," and the two adjourned to the inner room once more, while Colonel Brandt hastened back to the hotel, threw off his disguise, and telling the landlord that he was surprised his visitors had not come, went back to his home to add falsehood to his other sins by informing poor Maud that he had set the officers of the law to work up the stolen jewels.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE GHOUL OF THE SEA.

I WILL now return to Irving Brandt, who departed in his lugger, the Lady Maud, to return to the plantation to see if all was well there.

The colonel had little dread of the pirates doing any damage there, as all of value had been removed back from the sea-shore; but then he was anxious to know if they had returned, and if all was progressing favorably.

As for Irving, he was more desirous of being on the lugger than in the city, and wanted to see if he could make any discoveries to lead to the solving of the mystery as to who was really the Ghoul of the Sea.

With this desire, he left the lake-shore anchorage, and headed for home, perfectly fearless as to the consequences, should he meet an enemy, as he had already tested the speed of the lugger to his entire satisfaction, while he had full confidence in his negro crew, who he felt would stand by him to a man.

They had black faces, were ignorant, and slaves; but they had big hearts beneath their broad breasts, and were as brave as lions, while they were devoted to their young master.

With a fair breeze, the Lady Maud went speeding away on her return voyage, and when night fell she was well on her way.

Having held the deck since his departure, Irving became wearied toward midnight, and left the vessel in charge of Wood, who was a most competent sailor, and acted as first mate.

Wood was in a good humor, particularly so, as were the others of the crew, for Irving had promised them all a handsome present in money, when the smuggled goods were sold, and they were anxious to show their appreciation of his kindness.

Not anxious to get home too quickly, Irving had stood away into Chandeleur Sound, and the lugger was bowling merrily along, with Wood in charge, when suddenly out from behind an island shot a large schooner.

All was at once confusion on board the lugger, Wood putting the helm hard down and ordering the crew to let everything fly to dart away before the wind, while he sent a man below to call Irving.

The youth sprang on deck to see the schooner almost in easy pistol range and to hear the stern command:

"Lay to or I'll blow you out of the water!"

Irving Brandt possessed a wonderful nerve for a youth of his years, and he took in at a glance the entire situation.

He saw that a reef was between the lugger and the schooner, and that the latter must round the head of this, half a mile distant, before she could come directly in chase.

By that time the lugger could have a mile start, and directly before the wind she sailed with marvelous speed.

But to fly he must risk the fire of the schooner.

A glance told him that it was his old enemy, the Ghoul of the Sea, and, from the record of the commander, he felt that he need expect no mercy.

Seeing that Wood had done just what was right he told him so, and added:

"We'll run for it, Wood."

"Yes, massa, it am de best, for while we is going we hain't ketch'd," was Wood's very philosophical remark.

Just then, having received no answer to his command, and seeing that the lugger was flying with all speed, the pirate commander shouted in trumpet tones:

"Fire! knock him out of the water! you devils, at those guns!"

The guns along the schooner's broadside flashed, almost together, and the hail of iron tore on after the devoted lugger.

In an instant it was upon her, cutting through her sails, severing a rope here and there, splintering a spar and tearing up the deck in several places.

"Who is hurt?" shouted Irving, in a loud voice.

"Not a blamed nigger of us all, massa, praise de Lord!" cried Halpin, the second mate, from forward.

"That is joyous news. Now let him have it from our stern gun," cried Irving, and almost instantly the eighteen-pounder mounted aft sent forth its red flame, which hurled a solid shot upon the schooner.

The crash, as the missile tore through the schooner, was distinctly heard on the lugger; but the cheer of the sable crew was quickly checked by another broadside from the schooner.

This fire of the pirate was fatal to one poor negro, while several others were wounded, and what was worse, it cut away the rudder-chains, and the lugger was at the mercy of her foe.

As she swept up into the wind sail was quickly lowered, and seeing this the schooner did not again fire, but rounding the reef came down toward the Lady Maud under a full press of canvas.

As she drew near Irving stood upon the quarter-deck in no enviable frame of mind.

He had glanced sadly at the faithful fellow who had been killed, and said a few words of

kindly sympathy to the wounded, after which he walked aft and said, calmly:

"Well, Wood, it is all up with us."

"It am too bad, young massa; but I reckons dat de darned priest won't kill us, sah."

"I sincerely hope not; but at any rate, I'll soon know just who it is that commands that vessel, and that will be one satisfaction."

In a short while more the schooner was near enough to hail, and sharply came the words:

"Lugger ahoy!"

"Ahoy the Sea Ghoul!" boldly responded Irving.

"What lugger is that?"

"The Lady Maud pleasure yacht."

A silence of some moments followed, during which the schooner luffed up to leeward of the lugger and lay to.

"Who commands that lugger?"

"Irving Brandt, at your service," responded the youth coolly.

"Did you suffer any from my fire?"

"Yes, I lost one killed, and three slightly wounded."

"Did your vessel suffer any?"

"Yes, my rudder chains are cut, and other damage done."

"Who is on board the lugger, Captain Brandt?" and the tone was polite, while Irving muttered:

"Wood, I have heard that voice often before."

"It does sound familiar like, massa."

Then in a loud voice Irving called back, in answer to the pirate's question:

"I am here alone with my crew."

"Had I known that it was your yacht, Irving Brandt, I would not have molested you, and the damage I have done you, my crew shall quickly repair."

"Well, this is strange," said Irving, and aloud he called out:

"What schooner is that?"

"The Ghoul of the Sea."

"Who is her commander?"

"The one whom men have called the Pirate Priest."

"Do you mean that you are Bradford Carr?" and Irving asked the question in strangely distinct tones, and breathlessly awaited an answer.

"Yes, I am he that was Bradford Carr; but, fallen from grace, I am now the Ghoul of the Sea," came in deep tones from the deck of the schooner, now not a cable's length distant from the lugger.

"No, no, I cannot yet believe it, for I must see him face to face, as well as hear him, before I am convinced."

"I may be a fool to still doubt; yet doubt I do, and shall until convinced," and Irving looked moodily over the waters toward the schooner, from which a boat was now putting off.

In a short while the boat ran alongside the lugger, and an officer sprang on board, followed by a dozen men.

Saluting politely, he said:

"I am directed, sir, by Captain Carr to express his great regrets that he fired upon your vessel, and to do all I can to repair the damage done."

"Thank you, but my crew can do that, sir, and as for your captain firing upon me, I expect it, as I am his foe and beg for no mercy," returned Irving haughtily.

The officer merely shrugged his shoulders and answered:

"Your words I will repeat to my captain, sir, upon my return; but I was sent on board here to repair damages, and I shall obey orders."

"As you please," and Irving turned on his heel and went into the cabin, while the pirates set to work with such right good will that, within an hour's time they had the lugger ready to go on her way once more.

"The repairs are made, sir, and I am about to return to my vessel."

"Have you any message for my commander?" and the pirate officer entered the cabin where Irving sat in moody thought.

"Yes, tell him that if he is really Bradford Carr, I hope to see him hanged at the yard-arm some day for a treacherous bound and the red-handed pirate that he is," said Irving with fierce earnestness.

"I will deliver your message, Captain Brandt."

"Good-night, sir, and a pleasant voyage to you," and the young officer left the lugger.

Back to his own vessel he went, while Irving went on deck, but gave no order to set sail.

He preferred to wait and see what the pirate intended doing.

He had not long to wait, for the boat was soon hauled up to her davits, and the schooner fell off until her sails caught the wind, when she sped swiftly and silently away in the darkness.

CHAPTER XXX.

CHANGING HIS COLORS.

"RUDOLPHO, you are a good hand at disguises, and do you think it possible to fix me up so that my friends cannot recognize me, when they have not seen me for months?"

"I can fix you up, captain, so that your own mother will not know you."

"Do so, and name your price."

The two men sat in the little back-room of Rudolph's shop, just where Colonel Brandt had left them, and the one known as captain had evidently decided on some bold plan, when he asked his companion the question that opens this chapter.

"Now how would you go about disguising me, Rudolph?"

"Well, captain, in the first place you have a beard, which you did not wear months ago.

"And never wore before."

"So much the better; but to continue, I will say that you are a brunette, with dark hair, beard and eyes.

"The latter I cannot change the hue of, but your hair and beard I can make a perfect blonde, with a dye which I have.

"This will utterly alter your face, and you must aid me by your voice."

"Change my voice?"

"Yes, in a measure; but you must do better by talking broken English, for you must play French, as you speak that language perfectly."

"Rudolph, you are a treasure, and I will follow your advice at once.

"Let me see, I will pretend to be a French gentleman, traveling for pleasure in this country, and my name will be—let me see, how does Enrique Erricson strike you?"

"It is a good name, captain."

"Then do your work, for I wish to lose no time in carrying out a little plot I have on hand."

"For mischief, I'll wager, captain."

"As a matter of course, or it would not interest me," was the sinister response.

Setting to work, Rudolph, with real artistic skill, slowly but surely changed the brunette captain into a perfect blonde.

Then some fashionable clothing was secured from the stock on hand in the shop, a trunk was hauled out, and a distinguished looking foreigner issued from the dingy abode, sprung into a cabriolet and was driven with his luggage to the finest hotel in the city, where he registered as Enrique Erricson of France.

Of course a man of his distinguished appearance, and who scattered his gold about with generous hand, was not long in making acquaintances, and, pleased with their new acquisition, the young bloods who took him in tow were anxious to at once introduce him into fashionable society, and thus it was that within less than a week, Monsieur Enrique Erricson became "the rage."

Among those whom he met, the second day after his arrival, was Colonel Brandt, who seemed to take quite a fancy to the presumably wealthy and distinguished foreigner, and invited him up to his house for dinner.

Maud received her father's guest somewhat coldly, though politely, and fearing that the warm-hearted Frenchman might be hurt by her manner, he explained to him as a secret, that she had lately had stolen from her a casket containing over fifty thousand dollars' worth of jewels, many of which had been heirlooms, and it had put a damper upon her feelings.

"But do not speak of it, monsieur, for I have the officers of the law at work now, looking up the thieves," said the colonel.

"Oh no, Monsieur le Colonel, I will never speak of the robbery to your most beautiful daughter," answered Monsieur Enrique Erricson, placing his hand upon his heart and bowing low.

After dinner the colonel proposed to his guest to go to the club with him, and after a look in there, the Palace of Chance was the next place visited.

The colonel seemed somewhat nervous as he entered the gambling saloon, and the truth was, he had been playing with the money he got on the stolen jewels, hoping to win back enough money to have ready to pay Irving upon his return, and also to redeem the articles in Rudolph's hands.

But night after night he had lost instead of winning, and with but a few thousand left he was growing very nervous as to what the end would be for him.

The Frenchman seemed to be born under a lucky star, for he won continually, while the colonel lost until he had played his last large stake.

"I must quit now, as I have no more money with me," said Colonel Brandt with forced calmness.

"Your credit is good here, colonel, for any amount you desire to borrow," said the keeper of the salon.

"Thank you, and I will impose upon you—"

"No, Monsieur le Colonel, I am your friend, and not the bank is your friend, so let me give you the money that you need," interrupted the Frenchman quickly.

"Thank you, monsieur, and I will borrow a thousand or two to try my luck again, for fortune must change toward me soon."

"Certainement, Monsieur le Colonel, the little goddess of fortune must come to you soon."

"See, take what you was pleased to have, *mon cher monsieur*," and the Frenchman handed over to the colonel a large roll of banknotes.

Colonel Brandt was desperate, for he knew

that he must win, or all was lost, and if he continued to lose, a few more thousands made little odds.

So he drew from his willing companion money after money, and lost it almost as quickly.

At last the limit came, and the Frenchman said.

"Monsieur, you have lost ten thousand dollars of my moneys, and you must play no more to-night."

The colonel looked at him with a pitiful expression, as though begging that he would let him go on, while he said in a hoarse whisper:

"Monsieur Erricson, luck must change soon."

"No, monsieur, you play no more to-night."

"Come with me."

There was something in the manner of the Frenchman that awed and controlled the colonel, and in silence he walked away with him.

"Come to my hotel, Monsieur le Colonel," he said upon reaching the street, and soon after the two were seated in the very elegant quarters of Monsieur Enrique Erricson, the colonel white-faced, haggard and almost desperate, his companion calm and smiling, as though he had no care on earth.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE GAMBLER ENTRAPPED.

FOR some moments, after reaching the room in the hotel, neither the planter nor the Frenchman spoke.

Then the latter said:

"An eagle for your thoughts, monsieur."

"I was thinking of which was the better way to end one's life," was the desperate reply.

"Nonsense, monsieur, do not speak so, for ze blood runs cold to hear you."

"Life is pleasant and merry, and I have something so pleasant to tell you."

"I will certainly be glad to hear anything pleasant that you have to say," said the colonel.

Dropping his broken English, and speaking in French, which the colonel understood perfectly, the Frenchman said:

"You told me that your daughter had lately had stolen from her a casket of valuable jewels?"

"Yes," stammered the colonel.

"I can secure them for her, Colonel Brandt."

"That would be impossible, for the law officers have been unable to discover any trace of them, or a clue to the thief."

"I can produce the jewels, nevertheless, colonel."

"You!" and Colonel Brandt sprung to his feet livid with terror.

"Yes, Colonel Brandt."

"Never, sir!"

The Frenchman smiled, and answered:

"I can do as I say, and I will return them to your daughter upon certain conditions."

"No, no, it is impossible that you should have them."

"It is true that I have them, as I can convince you."

"See! do you recognize this case?"

The man had crossed the room, and taken from a trunk a morocco case, which he held up to the view of the colonel.

"Yes! yes! it is the box of jewels!"

"In the name of Heaven where did you get them?"

"Sit down, Colonel Brandt, for I have something to say to you."

With a groan the gambler planter sunk into his chair and gazed upon the Frenchman with a look of fascination.

"It matters not where I got them, colonel; but I can produce the thief within a very short while."

"No, no, you do not know him, I am sure."

"Colonel Brandt, listen to me."

"I will," groaned the unhappy man.

"You see here the morocco case containing your daughter's jewels?"

"Yes."

"I will open it with a key I have here, and you will see that they remain intact."

"Yes, yes, they are hers, and they are all there."

"Now, colonel, I am perfectly willing to return Miss Brandt her jewels, but upon certain conditions."

"What conditions can you ask, sir?"

"Her hand in marriage."

Colonel Brandt was astounded.

He knew that his host had seen Maud but once, and now to receive a proposal for her hand amazed him almost as much as did his having possession of the jewels.

"This, sir, is most sudden, and—"

"My dear colonel, let us understand each other."

"I am a creature of circumstances, an adventurer, and I seek a wife and a fortune."

"Your daughter is an heiress, she is beautiful, and she is very rich."

"She cannot, I am aware, by the terms of her inheritance, marry without your consent, and therefore I need that."

"You are penniless, as I am also aware, and have no means whatever of paying the money back which you borrowed of me to-night."

"Now, I wish to marry your daughter, and I expect your aid."

"You must urge it upon her, and if she refuses you must aid me, for I will marry her by force if I must."

Colonel Brandt was amazed beyond expression; but he felt that the man spoke the truth, and he certainly held him in his power.

After a moment of silence he said:

"Monsieur, had you tried to win my daughter's love you might have done so, and, believing you a man of honor, I would have readily given my consent to her marriage with you."

"But you are a self-confessed adventurer, and you expect me to urge that my daughter marry such?"

"Yes, and you will do so."

"I will not."

"Be careful of your words, Colonel Brandt, for I hold the winning cards, and you will lose in this, as you have lost to-night."

"I will not lose, sir, when I am right."

"I can force you to consent."

"Never, sir!" and the colonel sprung to his feet.

"You think not?"

"I know that you cannot."

"Shall I show you the handful of trumps that I hold?"

"Yes, prove your power," and yet the colonel's voice trembled as he asked the question.

"First, you drew for your son the money paid him for his yacht by Government?"

"Ay, at his request."

"Did he request you to lose it at cards?"

The colonel winced, but answered:

"His money is ready for him when he demands it."

"Bah! you have not a dollar with which to pay him."

"But to my second shot."

"I am listening, sir."

"You received the money on the prize goods your son left to be sold."

The colonel turned a shade paler, but said faintly:

"I had his order to collect that also."

"Very true, colonel, but not his order to gamble it away."

"He can have it."

"Oh, yes, if you can raise it in any way; but you have broken the solemn pledges you made to him and to your daughter not to gamble, and you do not care for them to know it, for you know the threat of your kindred to place you in an asylum, as you are not to be trusted."

"Oh, God! that fear haunts me by day and night."

"I should think that it would; but now let me fire my third broadside at you."

"You lost the yacht-money, and to win it back you got the prize-money, and that went too."

"Then you grew desperate, and added another sin to your life."

"And what was that, sir?" demanded the colonel.

"You stole your daughter's jewels!"

Colonel Brandt sunk back in his chair with a groan, and it was some time before he could articulate:

"It is a lie."

"It is the truth; and you borrowed money on them, when you had led your daughter to believe that you had the officers of the law searching for them and the thief. These jewels are in my possession, and I know just what you did with them, and what you got on them, and I shall expose you as the thief unless you agree to my terms."

"By the way, I have another shot to fire at you, and that is the fact that you owe me ten thousand dollars. Now, my dear colonel, you see that I hold you in my power, and I shall expect you to urge my suit with your daughter."

"Good God! can I do otherwise?"

"I cannot see how you can, unless you wish to be published as a thief to the world."

"No! no! no! I will do as you demand, for I am wholly in your power," groaned the unhappy gambler.

"Well, let us reason together, and then I will tell you what I will do. I desire to marry your daughter. I have money enough to live well, and will give her the idea that I am rich."

"I understand."

"Once she is my wife—because I love her—I will seek other scenes, and try and make her happy."

"Heaven grant it!"

"Now let me relieve your mind by showing how generously I will treat you."

"Ah!"

"You need a certain sum of money to pay to your son for his yacht?"

"I do."

"You also desire a certain sum to give him in place of what you got for the booty?"

"Yes, sir."

"These amounts I will give you."

"Do you mean it?" eagerly cried the colonel.

"I do."

"You certainly are a strange man."

"No, I do this for your daughter, whom I love devotedly; but more, you are not to spend one dollar of this money."

"I will not."

"Nor touch a card, or in any way gamble."

"I pledge you my honor—"

"Bah! your pledges are not worth the breath you use in making them. I tell you what you are and are not to do, and I dare you to do otherwise," was the threatening remark.

Not a word did the colonel utter in response, and the strange man continued:

"Now, these are your daughter's jewels?"

"Yes."

"I will return to her the jewels, to make a point in my favor with her."

"I will tell her that you told me of the theft, and, with a love for solving mysteries, and having ample time on my hands, I set out to track down the thief, and not only did so, but got the jewels."

"I will tell her that the thief escaped, after a desperate struggle with me, while I was taking him to prison, but that I held on to the jewels."

"This will give me a hold upon her friendship, you know, and you can hint in the morning to her, that I am searching for them, from the deep interest I took in her at first sight."

"I can but do as you tell me, sir."

"And, colonel, there are ten thousand due me by you?"

"I know it, alas!"

"That you need not pay, unless our little plan falls through."

"Now I will write a few lines here, making an acknowledgment of the moneys I pay you, and for what purpose, the debt you owe me, which was borrowed last night, and the jewels I hold for your daughter."

"Here, just sign this, please," and the man hastily wrote the words that placed Colonel Brandt wholly in his power.

Utterly desperate, and seeing help only through the strange man who had entrapped him, he signed the paper, and instantly the money was counted out to him, with which to pay Irving on his return, which the colonel was the more anxious to do, as he had acted in the prize-money without the youth's consent, and was fearful that his forgery of his son's name would come out.

"Now, Colonel Brandt, let us have a glass of wine together, and then you had better return directly to your home, and in the morning I will visit you and return the jewels."

"One minute, sir."

"Well, colonel?"

"How did you get these jewels?"

"You simply sold them to a man in my employ, sir; but ask no more questions, for your secret is safe with me."

Then Colonel Brandt dashed off a glass of brandy, and taking his leave walked slowly homeward, his brain full of maddening emotions.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE SEA FOX.

It was the morning after the capture and release of the Lady Maud, by the Ghouls of the Sea, and the lugger was sailing quietly along, her crew engaged in erasing the last signs of the fire she had been under, when a sail was sighted standing so as to head the little vessel off.

The poor negro sailor who had been slain, was lying under a hammock forward, for Irving intended to carry his body to the plantation for burial, knowing that his kindred would be glad to have that consolation.

The crew wore a saddened look, and Irving was by no means in a cheerful humor, after his experiences of the past night.

But the sighting of a sail running out from behind an island, changed the quietude of the lugger's crew to busy action, for they did not know but that they had another foe to meet, that might prove less merciful.

Instantly Irving leveled his glass at the stranger, and a smile of pleasure lighted up his face as he muttered:

"It is the Sea Fox, and I must speak with him."

"But it will not do to let Wood and the crew suspect he is a pirate, or they may think I am in league with them."

"Here, Wood, bring me my signal flags," he called out.

"Yes, massa; but does you recognize him?" asked the negro mate, as he placed the flags in the hands of his young master.

"It is a vessel-of-war, of some kind, Wood; but I will see by signaling."

Then Irving sent up the signal:

"Is that the Sea Fox?"

"Yes. Ho! the Lady Maud!" came back the answering signal.

"Run up your Stars and Stripes, and signal for me to come on board," returned Irving with his flags.

"Ay, ay!" came the answer; and soon after the Stars and Stripes went up to the schooner's peak, and she lay to, while another signal was sent up, and Irving said:

"Wood, that signal means for me to come on board."

"Better be mighty keeful, massa, for dese spirits is up ter all kinds of tricks."

"You don't think he is a pirate, do you, Wood?"

"Waal, sah, I don't wish ter 'sult a Govern-

ment sloop, if he be one; but he do look to me most strangely like de Sea Fox pirate, sah."

"Then he will not harm us, Wood, for I never heard of the Sea Fox doing any damage to vessels on our coast."

"No, sah; but he hab make up for it far out in de Gulf wid other wessels, sah."

"I'll risk the danger, Wood, and go alone; but see, he flies the United States flag, and answered all my signals."

"Yes, sah; dem pirts is posted, I kin tell you."

"Better let some o' dem no-'count niggers forward go, sah, and find out what you wants ter know."

"Ef dey grabs him, we kin run for it, sah, for we has a stiff breeze, an' kin git away afore de wind awful fast."

Irving laughed, but soon gave the order to lay to, and springing into the yacht's small boat, rowed rapidly toward the schooner.

Captain Palafox had understood his signal, and not knowing who was to come with him, and assuming that he was expected to play naval officer, he had his men rigged out in the attire of United States seamen, while he met his young visitor at the gangway in the uniform of a captain in the navy.

"I am glad to see you, sir. Come with me into my cabin," he said, politely, and Irving followed him.

When out from under the eyes of the crew, Captain Palafox said, pleasantly:

"Now sit down, Master Irving, and tell me how I can serve you."

"I met the Ghoul of the Sea last night, Captain Palafox!"

"Ah! Would to Heaven I could say as much!"

"Yes; he ran out from behind one of the Chateaus directly upon me."

"Well?"

"He hailed and ordered me to come to, or he would knock me out of the water; but I ran for it."

"That was good."

"No; for he fired upon me, and cut my rudder chains, besides doing other damage, killing one of my crew and wounding others—"

"That was bad, indeed!"

"It was, so I had nothing to do but surrender."

"Well, Irving?" and it was very evident that the captain was deeply interested.

"He found out who I was and sent an officer and men on board to repair damages after which he allowed me to go unmolested."

"This is remarkable; but you saw this pirate who sails under the Cutlass and Cross flag?"

"No, sir."

"Then you do not yet know whether he is your old tutor, Bradford Carr?"

"I asked the officer the name of his captain, and he said that it was Bradford Carr."

"Then you are convinced at last."

"By no means, for the woman told me as much."

"No, I must have better proof, and you are the only man who can give it to me."

"I certainly shall do all in my power to do so; but tell me which way the Ghoul of the Sea headed after leaving you?"

"The last I saw of her she was standing toward the Isle on Breton Sound, as though heading for the Balize."

"And there he has doubtless gone, and there I will follow him at once; but whither are you bound?"

"To the plantation to see how matters are there."

"Well, good luck to you; but what time was it that you parted from the schooner?"

"About an hour before daybreak."

"Then he has some half dozen hours' start of me; but I will crowd on sail and hope to find him."

Irving then bade Captain Palafox good-by, and returning on board his lugger set sail for Brandt Harbor while the schooner, under clouds of canvas pushed on after the Ghoul of the Sea.

"He wasn't no pirt then, massa?" said Wood as Irving returned to the lugger.

"Do you see the way he is crowding on sail, Wood?"

"Yes, massa."

"Well, he is going in chase of the Ghoul of the Sea."

"I hopes he will cotch him."

"I hope so too, Wood."

"Waal, massa, I is glad it were a Gov'ment cruiser, but de more I looked at him, de more skeert I got for you, as it am de image of de skunner dey calls de Sea Fox."

"It might be the Sea Fox, Wood, under a different flag."

"Dat is so, sah, and I reckons 'tis, and dat de Gov'ment hab cotted de Sea Fox."

"Yas, sah, dat am de way it am sartin, for my eyes don't deceive me, sah," and Wood was glad to get at a solution of how the Sea Fox could look so like a Government vessel.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE MEETING IN THE FOREST.

IRVING BRANDT held on his way after leaving the Sea Fox, and in good time arrived in the plantation harbor.

The slaves had sighted the lugger from their place of work in the fields, and gathered quickly at the shore to greet those on board.

As she glided gently alongside of the dock, a wild shout of welcome went up from a hundred throats, and many were the inquiries made after "ole massa, Missy Maud, and Elizette."

But a wail followed when the body of the slain seaman was brought on shore, and a solemn procession formed to follow it to the quarters where it would be prepared for burial.

Dismissing his crew for the day to attend the funeral, Irving wandered through the mansion, and over the grounds, sadly remembering the many happy days that he had passed there, and how often he had sat in the arbor studying his lessons, with Bradford Carr by to aid him.

The flowers now hung unplucked upon the stems, the house was desolate, and the lawn so dreary that the youth took his gun, and mounting his horse started for a ride in the forest in search of game.

Suddenly, as he neared the shore of a small inlet a deer came bounding toward him, and aware that he had not startled him, Irving refrained from firing, to see who had, for he was confident that the animal had seen a human being, and who else than himself could be in that lone region.

Dismounting, he cautiously approached the shore, and soon came upon a scene that filled him with surprise.

There, upon the bank, cooking a bird upon some coals of fire sat a man, while near by was tied a small sailboat.

The sail was up, and there were oars and a roll of blankets, with other things in the boat, showing that the man was evidently making a voyage along the coast.

He sat with his back to Irving, and was very intent upon cooking his midday meal.

He was a muscularly-formed man, with a great broad back, and the youth knew that he was no match for him in strength, should it come to a struggle, so determined to keep the advantage he thus held.

That the man was there for no good, seemed evident, from the fact that he had run in from the outer coast, as though to avoid being seen, and was doubtless lying in concealment during the day and sailing by night.

Irving knew that the smugglers' retreat was not very many leagues away, and he did not doubt but that the man was seeking their haunts, and was himself a smuggler, or a pirate.

"Well, my man, you look lonely," he said, as he stepped forward, his rifle leveled at the heart of the stranger.

Instantly the man was upon his feet, his hand grasping a pistol in his belt, as he turned upon the youth.

But as each saw the face of the other there was a mutual recognition, and Irving said:

"Ah, it is you, is it, my smuggler friend?"

"Yes, captain, it is me; but I did not expect to see you in these parts," answered the man, who was none other than the traitor smuggler, who had betrayed the pirate's wife and his booty to Irving.

"My home is but a couple of leagues away; but what are you doing here?"

"You know my calling, captain?"

"That of smuggling, perhaps worse."

"It is no worse, young captain; but I was a smuggler."

"And you said you would give up the dishonest life you have led in the past."

"I have given it up, captain."

"It does not look so, when you are hiding here by day, and sailing by night toward the smugglers' retreat."

"True, captain, but I am going there to get money due me, and then I'll give up the life."

"Are you not afraid that you will be suspected of being a traitor, and that they will kill you?"

"No, captain, no one suspected me, not even the captain's wife, and you told them that I had escaped."

"Yes, I so led them to believe; but do you wish to lead an honest life?"

"I do, captain."

"Then guide me to-night to this smugglers' retreat."

"They would kill you, captain."

"I do not intend to go alone, but with my crew."

"Pilot me there and you shall be well paid, and do your conscience a good turn by breaking up a dastard band of thieves."

"Young captain, let me tell you something," said the man, after a moment's thought.

"Well?"

"I know all about the smugglers on this coast, and just how they are leagued with pirates."

"So I believe."

"Well, captain, at the retreat now you would not find but two or three persons and no booty; for you captured their sloop, which they had stolen from you, and you have now their lugger, which they left in your harbor the night they took your yacht."

"Well, sir?"

"Now they are reduced to a small craft that

is not of much account; but the crew are in her now, cruising about in wait for smuggled cargoes."

"To what does all this tend?"

"I am going on to explain, sir."

"And I am anxious to know whether you intend to do as I ask."

"Well, captain, I wish to make you the following proposal."

"I will hear it."

"Let me go on to the retreat and get the money due me."

"Then I will find out just where the smuggled cargo is to be brought in, and at once come and let you know, so that you can go there with a force large enough to take the whole band and their vessels."

"How many men are there in the band?"

"Thirteen, now that you captured some of them."

"And these are the Sea Owls?"

"Yes, captain, under Restel."

"It would be a valuable capture to get that old villain and his entire crew."

"Yes, sir, with his vessels and booty too; but he is in league with the Ghoul of the Sea, as I told you, for he sells the sea plunder for the pirate, and the lady you captured, you know, was Captain Restel's daughter."

"A smuggler's daughter and a pirate's wife," said Irving with a sneer.

"Yes, captain, but she's a good woman for all that."

"But what do you think of my plot?"

"You will pilot me to the haunt when you know that the men are all there?"

"Yes, sir."

"How will you get away?"

"I will ask for leave, which I am entitled to."

"When do you expect this vessel in with her smuggled cargo?"

"Within two months, sir."

"That is a long time."

"You see, captain, that she just sailed, for you got the booty of her last trip in, and she cruises off the Balize, Pensacola and Mobile to meet vessels there bound to those places at certain times, and that have on board bales of smuggled goods for her."

"Well, my man, you propose to await the return of this craft with her smuggled goods and then pilot me there?"

"Yes, captain, for a consideration."

"Of course you mean for gold?"

"I am not a rich man, young captain."

"What is your price?"

"If I deliver the Sea Owls—"

"With their captain."

"Yes, with their captain, vessels, and their booty into your power, I want one thousand dollars."

"And a pardon?"

"I am not particular as to that, for I shall live where I am not suspected of needing a pardon."

"Well, you shall have the money."

"Then it is a bargain, captain, so tell me where I can see you at any time."

"I will be in New Orleans, where my father now has a home, or cruising on my lugger."

"Don't go cruising after a few weeks, captain, but be on hand."

"I will."

"And if I can't get off to give you any news, how can I let you know?"

"Go to Brandt Plantation and tell the overseer you have a letter to send to me by Burke, for he is a negro you can trust."

"I'll do it, sir; but now let me give you a piece of advice."

"Well, I am always open to advice."

"Don't stay in these waters with your lugger, for the smugglers know what she can do and want her back, and they are shadowing her, you may be certain."

"Thank you."

"I saw you run in, and I tell you not to stay in the harbor to-night."

"I thought you said the band were off on a cruise."

"They are, but they may be here, there, anywhere, and they'll try hard to get back their old Sea Owl, now that you have fitted her up so fine and armed her, not to speak of the extra spars and rags you put on her, which makes her sail like a witch."

"Now, captain, take my advice, and if you have to stay at the plantation a few days, go to sea at night, for sailing, nothing can catch you."

"And don't you forget to keep a lookout by day, when you are in the harbor, for a strange sail might run in on you and then good-by lugger."

"I believe you are honest, my man, and I thank you."

"I'm honest, sir, if it serves my ends best to be honest, and just now it does, for I'll make something by my honesty, while it looks as though there would be neck-stretching soon for the outlaws along this coast, as they are getting too troublesome."

"You are right; but now I will leave you, and I shall expect to hear from you within the given time."

"You shall, sir."

"If I do not, I'll come in search of you with a rope in my hand."

"You'll not have to stretch my neck, young captain, whatever you do for the others."

"Good-by, sir, and good luck to you," and the man touched his tarpaulin politely as Irving rode away, and then turning to look at his bird broiling upon the coals, found it burned to a crisp.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE MEETING IN THE LIBRARY.

COLONEL BRANDT had certainly had another severe lesson, against his mad infatuation for gambling, and he walked home mentally vowing that he had touched his last card and made his last bet.

How the jewels, which he had pledged to a loan broker, came into the hands of the man he believed to be a Frenchman, he could not imagine.

"That fellow reminds me of some one I have known well; but who, I cannot tell."

"He certainly is French, for he speaks the language perfectly, while his English accent is decidedly French."

"Who can he be, I wonder?"

"He is a villain, that is certain, for he confessed himself an adventurer, and they live by their wits off of other people."

"Well, whatever he is, I hardly think he can be worse than I am after my sins of the past week."

"I am in his power, that is certain, and he is my master."

"But he has given me the money to pay Irving and will return the jewels, so I am square with all the world again excepting him."

"And in some way I must get even with him."

"But how?"

He had now arrived at home, and, to his surprise, found a bright light burning in the library.

The fact was Maud had begun to feel anxious about her father of late, and she was determined to remain up and see him when he came home.

He had looked pale and worried and seemed to avoid her; but that she thought might be on account of the lost jewels.

His friend, Monsieur Enrique Erricson, she had not particularly liked, but she had to admit that he was a very *distingue* looking man, extremely courtly and entertaining.

Maud herself had grieved over the death of her friend, Miss Defoe, an old schoolmate, and then the loss of her diamonds had hurt her deeply.

But she tried to keep up a stout heart and banish little heart-aches as she had done in the past, for upon her heart had fallen a shadow that would not rise when Bradford Carr, the one honest love of her life, had left her so mysteriously.

While sitting up, book in hand, but thinking rather than reading, a quick step had resounded in the hall, and to her joy her brother, Irving, entered.

The two greeted each other most affectionately, and Irving was just about to give his sister a narrative of his cruise when in came their father.

The colonel started, but remembering that he had the money to clear himself he kissed Maud and warmly welcomed Irving, saying to him:

"Well, my boy, I am delighted to see you back, for I was becoming anxious at your long stay."

"I have had an eventful cruise, father, and after arriving at the plantation stayed two days, when I ran up to Mobile for supplies and thence here," and Irving told of his meeting with the Ghoul of the Sea and release by him.

"That convinces me more than ever, my son, that the pirate is your old tutor, for he had not the heart to harm you."

"It does not convince me, father, that he is."

"You are stubborn, Irving."

"And I also, father, for I still cling to the hope that it is not Bradford Carr that has raised the Cutlass and Cross flag," said Maud.

"But why should a pirate take the name of Bradford Carr?"

"That I am anxious to find out, father," answered Irving, and then he told how he had met an armed vessel and sent her in chase of the Ghoul of the Sea.

"Was it an American cruiser, my son?"

"She had the Stars and Stripes at her peak, father," was the evasive reply.

But Irving did not tell that he knew the schooner Devil Fish, commanded by the Sea Fox; but he made known his meeting the smuggler in the forest, and what he hoped to accomplish through him.

"And I believe you will, my son, and my word for it, the Government will make you an officer in the navy for your good work, for it will owe it to you; but let me tell you that I received the money for the yacht, and have it now for you, as also the amount of the prize sale, which I took the liberty of getting for you, when I found the man wished to keep the goods at a round figure."

"I thank you, father, and I meant to ask you to see to that also for me."

"Here are the accounts, and there the money, you will find them correct," and Colonel Brandt tossed the money upon the table with the air of a man who was doing some good deed.

Maud gave a sigh of relief, for it seemed to assure her that the possession of money had not caused her father to break his pledge.

"You dear, good papa," she said, as she bent over behind his chair, and kissed him.

The man's face flushed and then paled, for he felt his guilt deeply; but he said quickly:

"I kept the money with me, Irving, after your sister was so unfortunate as to lose her casket of jewels."

"Lose her jewels?"

"Why certainly, sis, you have not lost all those beautiful things?" cried Irving, in amazement.

"Yes, brother, even to the pretty ring you gave me for my graduating present."

"I foolishly left the casket open, and one night when I was away, at the bedside of Clara Defoe, they were stolen," and the tears came into Maud's beautiful eyes.

"You have no suspicion of the thief?"

"No, Irving; but father has seen the proper officials about them, and I hope they may be recovered."

"And I would tell you, Maud, that you have a friend who is doing all that he can to find the thief."

"And who is it father, that is so kind?"

"It is Monsieur Erricson, the French gentleman who dined with me, you remember."

"Yes; but he is your friend, sir, not mine."

"Well, he was deeply touched by your loss, and told me that in France he had been chief of the secret service under the king, and had a talent for detective work."

"He further said that he would at once start out to find the thief, and he went to the officers who had been on the trail, and questioned them most thoroughly."

"Then he started off, he said on a clew, and promised to report in the morning."

"He certainly is most kind, sir."

"He has taken a great interest in you, Maud."

"Well, if he finds the jewels we'll take a deep interest in him."

"Won't we, sis?"

"Yes, Irving, I certainly shall think most kindly of him."

"Who is he, father?" asked Irving.

"A French gentleman of wealth, traveling for pleasure, and a most clever fellow."

"He reminds me of one whose memory is despicable to me, and for that reason I do not like him, though it is hard to judge a man from his resemblance to a villain," said Maud.

"Come, my children, it is long after midnight, and we must retire," said the colonel, and the trio separated for the night, Maud rejoicing that her suspicions regarding her father having broken his pledge seemed wholly unfounded, and the colonel was happy that he had escaped from the net that encircled him for at least the present, while Irving soon slept the sleep of one who casts care and sorrow from him at will.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE STOLEN JEWELS.

AFTER their late hour of retiring, it was late the next morning when Colonel Brandt and his two children assembled at the breakfast-table.

Then Maud made known her intention of bringing a visitor to the house, in the person of a young girl whom Madam Chotard had at her school, and was anxious to have her meet some acquaintances, she being the daughter of a rich sea-captain who had left her in the charge of the madam.

"I will drive down to the school for her this morning, father, and I know you will like her," said Maud, while she continued, addressing Irving:

"And you will fall in love with her, brother."

"What is her name, sis?"

"Myrtle."

Irving started, and buried his face in his cup of coffee, while he thought:

"Well, that caps the climax, for it is my Myrtle, as there is no other at the school."

"Well, well, I guess I will like her, as sis says."

After breakfast Maud ordered the carriage and drove down to the school, the colonel remaining at home, as he confidently expected his French friend Erricson, while Irving had not the slightest idea of going down-town, while there was a prospect of Myrtle coming to the house.

After the absence of an hour Maud returned, and with her was Myrtle, the daughter of Captain Palafox.

Colonel Brandt gave the beautiful young girl a warm welcome, and Irving greeted her with a sober face, but with a sly wink of the eye that was furthest from his sister, and said bluntly:

"Sis Maud says that you and I have got to be good friends, Miss Myrtle, and I intend we shall be, for I like you to begin with."

Myrtle blushed, but before more could be said the butler entered with a card.

"Monsieur Enrique Erricson," said the colonel aloud, and then he added:

"Ask the gentleman in."

Dignified and courtly, Monsieur Erricson entered the room, and advancing to meet him the colonel greeted him in a kindly way, presenting Myrtle and Irving, while Maud bowed.

In many of the old families upon the Gulf coast and Mississippi shores of Louisiana and Mississippi, French is spoken as fluently as English, and the conversation was at once led into that language by Maud, out of respect for her father's guest, for, as soon as Monsieur Erricson was seated, she said:

"My father was telling me, monsieur, that you were good enough to interest yourself in my behalf, by trying to recover the jewels that were stolen from me; but, alas! I fear I shall never see them more."

"On the contrary, mademoiselle, the jewels are not lost," said the Frenchman.

"Indeed! have you heard of them, sir?" eagerly cried Maud.

"Permit me, mademoiselle, to return them to you."

As he spoke, Monsieur Erricson stepped outside of the door, and taking from beneath his cloak, a morocco case, he handed it to Maud, with the remark:

"Kindly see if these are your jewels."

"Oh, sir, they are mine," she cried gladly, as she unlocked the case with the key he had handed to her.

"And intact?"

"Yes, there is nothing missing," she replied after glancing hastily at each object.

"I am very glad, mademoiselle, that it has been my pleasure to restore them to you."

"But, sir, how have you accomplished what special officers could not do?"

"Mademoiselle Brandt, I had a talk with those officers, each and all of them."

"I put the clues they had together, got a theory of my own, followed it, and found your jewels in the possession of the thief, who had not dared dispose of any of them for fear of detection."

"I seized your jewels, but the thief, unfortunately, I did not capture."

"That is the history of the affair, mademoiselle, and, if I have given you pleasure I am more than glad."

"I know not how to thank you, sir, or what to say to you for your goodness to me."

"I ask no thanks, mademoiselle; I only ask to be your friend," he said earnestly.

Maud was prejudiced against the man; but she banished this feeling, and frankly extended her hand, while she said:

"If you care for my friendship, Monsieur Erricson, you shall have it."

Of course the Frenchman was invited to remain to dinner, and of course he accepted, and that day began his intimacy in the home of the Brandts, while his goal was to win and wed Maud, the heiress and belle of society.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

ON THE TURN OF A CARD.

THERE were two things to keep Irving very closely at home the week that followed his return from his cruise.

The first was that Myrtle was there, and her stay had been limited from Saturday to Saturday.

The second reason was his desire to be on hand if he should get a message from the smuggler.

He had, upon leaving home, left the greater part of his crew on the plantation, knowing that their services were needed there, and had left the lugger, with Wood and six men in charge, out at her anchorage in the lake.

Once he had given his sister, Myrtle and Monsieur Erricson a cruise of a few hours in the yacht, and on other days it had been rides and drives together.

On such occasions Irving had been Myrtle's escort, while the Frenchman accompanied Maud.

Thus the week passed, and Myrtle returned to her school, the Frenchman said that he would have to run over to Mobile for a few days, and Irving, finding the house very lonely went on board of his yacht.

There was one who rejoiced in the departure, if but for a season, of Monsieur Erricson, and that one was Colonel Brandt.

He hated the man, and he longed to have him out of his sight.

But he knew well that he was wholly in his power and dared not rebel.

As for Maud, the colonel could not tell whether she liked or disliked the Frenchman.

She was ever gracious to him, and seemed pleased with his company.

"But how will it all end?" the colonel continually asked himself.

The day after the departure of Monsieur Erricson and Myrtle, the colonel received his quarterly income, which amounted to something over a thousand dollars.

Instantly there came upon him the temptation to use it in freeing himself from the bondage of the Frenchman.

"If I can but win enough with it to pay him back what he advanced me, I will let him go his

way very quick, for I cannot bear him in my sight."

"I think I should risk this sum in trying to accomplish so great an end, and thereby prevent Maud from marrying a self-confessed villain."

"Well, I'll start on a hundred, and if I lose, I will stop at five hundred, but keep on playing if I win."

With this determination the gambler-planter sought the Palace of Chance that night.

He had paid the few little bills he owed, and with the balance, an even thousand, walked up to the table where a game was going on.

He had sunk enough money in that place to be treated with respect, and he was warmly welcomed by the keeper.

"Do you play to-night, colonel?" he was asked.

"Yes, a little, but I do not expect to go high," he answered quickly.

In a little while, after watching a game, he placed a hundred dollars upon the table and began to bet.

He won.

Then he tried again and won.

Thus he went on, until all gathered around him, excited by his wonderful luck, for he had not lost a dollar on the turn of the card, and betting largely he had checks against the bank for a very large sum.

Suddenly he paused, and stood an instant in deep thought.

And thus ran his thoughts.

"I have now more than enough to buy my freedom from that accursed Frenchman."

"But I wish a few thousand more, to lay up for anything that may arise to demand money."

"Surely my luck will not change now."

"This break may change it, so I'll feel it, by betting but five hundred."

"Then if I win, I'll make one more bet; and stake the pile on the result."

"Egad! it will make me a rich man, and I'll never touch another card."

He now turned again to the table, threw down five hundred dollars, the amount of his "feeler" to see if luck had deserted him, and awaited the result.

He smiled as he drew the money won toward him, but turned pale as he said:

"This is my last play to-night, and I risk all I have won on this card."

All awaited breathlessly the result.

"He has lost!" broke from a score of lips.

"I have lost!" came from between the shut teeth of Colonel Brandt.

For full a minute he stood silent and white.

Then he said:

"Lend me a couple of thousand."

"As much as you please, colonel," said the keeper, whom he had addressed.

"Perhaps your luck might change, sir, if you joined me in a game."

"I will play for any sum."

Colonel Brandt turned upon the speaker.

He was a young, reckless-faced man, dressed in the height of fashion, but on the flash order, and looked like one who believed in a short life and a merry one.

"I will play you, sir," said the colonel, and taking the money handed him by the keeper, he sat down to a table with the stranger.

"Who is he?" asked many voices, referring to the young man, but no one seemed to know.

"My name is Brandt, sir, and yours—" and the colonel smiled pleasantly.

"Dupont, sir, and I am happy to meet you, for I like a man who plays boldly, as I have noticed that you do, and does not whimper when he loses."

"What shall be the stake, Colonel Brandt?"

"One thousand to begin with, sir, if that will suit you."

"Oh, yes, one or ten thousand," was the cool reply.

The game then commenced, many looking on with interest, and Colonel Brandt's luck was again in the ascendant.

Several games he won, a thousand dollars being added to each one, until he was again largely a winner.

But his opponent did not seem to care how much he lost.

He coolly smoked a cigar, whistled or hummed a lively air, and pushed the money over to the colonel in a most nonchalant manner.

At last he said:

"You have won just ten thousand; put that sum on the next game if you please."

"Certainly, sir," and the colonel's eyes drooped as he lost.

"Let us make a bet of a like amount, sir, this time."

"If you are willing to accept my paper, sir."

"Certainly."

The colonel scribbled off an *I. O. U.*, and laid it upon the table.

It covered the sum of ten thousand put up by Mr. Dupont.

"Your luck fluctuates to-night, sir," said the young man, as he drew in the bit of paper with his bills.

"Will you try again, sir, for a like amount?"

"Yes," almost whispered the colonel, and he wrote another *I. O. U.*

Again the game was played, and again won by Dupont.

"Will you try again, sir, for luck will come back to you?"

"Yes."

"Pardon me, no, Colonel Dupont, nor shall this fellow hold your paper, or the ten thousand you just lost, for he is a cheat."

All were startled by the stern, ringing voice that fell upon their ears.

They beheld an individual who had stepped suddenly to the front, one of those kind of persons we sometimes meet with, and who look every inch a man.

He was a sailor, that was very evident, and his voice and appearance smacked of the quarter-deck.

He was on the shady side of forty, but was a handsome, daring, fearless-faced man, and his hand lay upon the two due-bills and money with a force that showed it would not be easily removed.

The colonel looked at him in utter amazement.

The young gambler gazed at him with an expression it was hard to fathom, while all around the table looked on with expectancy of a tragedy, the scene thus presenting a striking and thrilling tableau.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A SAILOR HAS SOMETHING TO SAY.

"By what right, sir, do you interfere in this game between gentlemen?" suddenly cried the young gambler, breaking the dead silence, and turning his flashing eyes upon the person who had thus rudely broken up the game of cards.

"By the right, sir, of preventing a gentleman from being cheated by a sharp," was the cool response.

"Hah! you dare accuse me of cheating?" and the young man arose quickly to his feet, his hand thrust in his breast-pocket.

"Sit down, sir, or I will kill you," thundered the sailor, springing toward him, and forcing him into his seat with a vigor that made his teeth rattle.

Then turning to Colonel Brandt, he continued, while he still kept his grip upon Dupont:

"Colonel Brandt, you won from this fellow ten thousand dollars honestly."

"Count out that sum and take it."

"But, sir, I—"

"Do as I tell you, and also take your two notes, for I intend to prove to you that this fellow is a blackleg and cheat."

"See!"

As the sailor spoke he threw open the coat of the young man, and with such force as to tear off the buttons, and a number of cards dropped to the floor.

"Do you see, gentlemen, that this man has acquainted himself with the kind of cards used in this place, possessed himself of them, and with nimble fingers manipulated his hands to suit himself?"

"I watched him for some time, detected his trick, and now ask you if he is not deserving of hanging at the yard-arm?"

"He deserves it!"

"Throw him out!"

"Duck him in the river!"

Such were the cries, with many more that arose upon all sides, and the culprit turned deadly pale, though he did not flinch.

As no one seemed to say just what should be done with the cheating gambler, the stranger said:

"Colonel Brandt, what shall be his fate?"

"Oh, put him in the city jail and let the law deal with him," answered the colonel, deeply annoyed at being made the victim of a blackleg, and anxious to retreat from the scene.

"I will do as you say, sir, and ask your aid to take him there."

There was something in the stranger's manner that showed Colonel Brandt that he wished to speak with him, and he said:

"I will accompany you with pleasure, sir."

"Here is the money I borrowed of you, Barclay," and returning the two thousand he had gotten from the keeper of the Palace of Chance, Colonel Brandt left the place in company with the sailor and his prisoner, while a cheer was given for the plucky man who had exposed the young cheat.

"Can I speak a word with Colonel Brandt, sir?" asked the young gambler, as the three reached the street.

"Do you care to speak with him, Colonel Brandt?"

The colonel was about to answer no, when the young gambler whispered:

"Erricson is my friend."

"Yes, I will hear what he has to say," answered the colonel, wondering what new trouble was to arise before him now.

"I will drop back ten paces, sir, and allow you to speak to Colonel Brandt; but see, I am armed, and I am a crack shot, so if you attempt to escape I will drop you dead in your tracks."

The sailor stepped back as he spoke to the distance of ten paces and then followed, while

the other two walked on together, conversing in a low tone.

"Well, sir, what does this mean?" asked Colonel Brandt.

"It means that I was set to watch you, to entrap you into a game of cards, and I did it," was the reply.

"Who set you to do this dirty work?"

"Enrique Erricson."

"Curse him!" hissed the colonel.

"That won't get me out of the scrape that that sharp-eyed sailor has caught me in," growled the young gambler.

"You should not have cheated me, and played spy."

"Don't lecture me, colonel, but get me out of my trouble."

"I cannot."

"It will be the worse for you if you don't."

"How can I?"

"Tell that iron-hand sailor that I am the degenerate son of an old bosom friend of yours."

"Tell him any lie you please, only set me free, for frankly, I won't stand scrutiny at the jail."

"Ah, you'll be recognized as an old offender?"

"I'll be recognized, yes, so get me off."

"You are impudent to ask me to do so."

"Very well, take me to jail and my chief will settle with you, for I know enough to understand that he has got a grip on you that you don't dare shake off."

This frightened the colonel, for he did stand in holy awe of Enrique Erricson, and calling to the sailor to approach them, he said:

"My dear sir, you have already been so kind to me that I dislike to ask a favor of you; but I find this young man is a son of a once dearly loved friend of mine, and for the sake of his poor mother, who is still living, I beg you to allow him to go free."

"Certainly, Colonel Brandt, if you do not care to appear against him it is not my affair; but he is a rascal and should be punished."

"Go, sir!" and the sailor sent the young gambler reeling into the middle of the street.

But, too glad to get away to quarrel about the manner of his setting free, the rascal ran down the street at full speed.

"Well, my friend, I have much to thank you for," said Colonel Brandt, turning to the sailor.

"I admit it, sir, for you were getting yourself into a scrape from which you could not see your way clear to get out."

"Pardon my frankness, Colonel Brandt, but you are now in pocket all that you won from that fellow, and take my advice and keep it."

"To be plain with you, I will say that you are from this night to be closely watched, and if you are seen, or known, to touch a card or gamble, you will get yourself into trouble from which you cannot extricate yourself."

"But, sir," stammered the colonel, now thoroughly alarmed, "who is it that is thus watching me?"

"Those who mean you well if you give up gambling, but who will be your foes if you continue it, for your son and daughter shall know of it if you err in a single instance again, and your home will be behind the bars of a lunatic asylum."

"Good-night, Colonel Brandt, and heed my warning."

The sailor turned on his heel as he spoke and walked rapidly away, leaving Colonel Brandt gazing after him and standing like one suddenly turned into a statue of stone.

At last he said, hoarsely:

"I will heed the warning or my last days will make me curse the hour I was born."

"Yes, this lesson I will heed."

"But who in Heaven's name is that man?"

And the colonel walked slowly homeward, trying in vain to solve the mystery as to who had been the sailor who so boldly came to his aid and as fearlessly spoke his mind.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

MONSIEUR ERRICSON RETURNS.

The day following the strange scene in the Palace of Chance, Colonel Brandt received a note from Monsieur Enrique Erricson, telling him that he had returned to the city and would be glad to see him at his hotel.

Colonel Brandt had been in dread of this.

He had feared more trouble when his opponent at cards the night before told him that he was the friend of the Frenchman.

He knew that the politely-worded note was nothing more than a demand.

He dared not disobey the order of a man in whose power he was, and he at once set off for the hotel.

Monsieur Erricson met him with a smiling face.

"You do not say that you are glad to see me back again, my dear colonel."

"I will not say what I do not mean."

"The truth is, Erricson, the chain you have about my neck galls me fearfully, and you are driving me to desperation," answered the colonel, hotly.

"Is that why you went to the gaming-table last night and lost heavily?" asked the man, with a sneer.

"I went there to try and win the money to pay off my indebtedness to you."

"Why, my dear colonel, you made a fool of yourself, for I would not take treble its value for what you owe me."

"I hold the trumps, and you must be content."

"When your daughter is my wife, I give up to you the paper I hold, and cancel all debts between us; but until that happy event occurs, you must be content to let matters rest as they are."

"Heaven have mercy upon me," groaned the unhappy man.

"Now, colonel, business called me away, and I left a trusty spy upon your movements."

"He was to try and inveigle you into gambling, and he readily did so."

"His cheating you was no plan of mine; but he is light-fingered and took that way of making a stake for himself."

"You had a friend come to your rescue, and my spy's wit saved him from going to jail, where he would have doubtless been recognized as a man who was wanted for crimes committed at sea and elsewhere."

"I suppose you know who your friend was?"

"I do not, sir, but I should very much like to know."

"I will tell you, then."

"My spy went to his head-quarters here, where he lies in hiding, and soon after, while he was talking to the landlord, in walked the very man who had so cleverly mastered him."

"He hid his face, slipped off to his room, and sending for the landlord, asked him who the stranger was."

"Well, who was he?"

"Have you no idea?"

"Not the slightest."

"Did you never see him before?"

"Not to my knowledge."

The man looked Colonel Brandt straight in the face, and, apparently satisfied that he was earnest in his assertion, he said:

"Yet that was not the first favor he has done you."

"I certainly do not recall any other."

"Was not your home attacked some time since?"

"You mean my plantation?"

"Yes."

"It was."

"By whom?"

"A band of cut-throats, under the lead of a merciless fiend, who is known on our coasts as the Ghoul of the Sea."

"He has another name?"

"Yes, he is also called the Pirate Priest."

"Do you know the man?"

"I do."

"Who is he?"

"A man who once saved my life, and whom I took into my family as a tutor for my son."

"How was it that he turned to piracy?"

"God only knows, for he had hopes of a bright future."

"But the devil was in his nature, I suppose, and he went to the bad."

"And he it was who landed from his vessel to attack your house?"

"It was."

"Well, colonel?"

"He did not succeed, for he was driven off."

"By your slaves?"

"No, sir, but by a man and his crew whom I did not know were anywhere near."

"Who was this man?"

"Palafox the Pirate men call him, and also they give him the name of the Sea Fox."

"Did you meet him that night?"

"I did not."

"Well, colonel, the man who befriended you last night was Palafox the Pirate!"

Colonel Brandt started from his chair at these words, while Monsieur Erricson sat still, and smiled pleasantly.

"Can this be true?"

"It is."

"And he dares trust himself in this city where he is known to many?"

"Yes, for he is a daring man, Colonel Brandt."

"Well, pirate though he be I thank him for his work last night."

Monsieur Erricson did not speak for some moments, and then he said:

"My dear colonel, I desire to make, through you, a formal proposal for your daughter's hand."

"Will you speak to her upon the subject?"

"Yes, for I can do nothing else."

"And urge that she accept my offer?"

"I dare not do otherwise."

"Then I leave my happiness in your hands."

"When shall I receive an answer?"

The colonel was silent for a moment, and his face flushed and paled by turns.

Then he responded:

"Meet me in the arbor in my garden to-night, just at ten o'clock, and I will give you my daughter's reply."

"I will be there, colonel; but it is strange that you appoint a meeting with a suitor for your daughter's hand out in your garden."

"No, sir, for there will be guests there to-night, and I wish you to meet them, and, after I have given you Maud's reply, then you can come on to the house."

"If she refuses?"

"She cannot, she must not refuse, for I am in your power," was the earnest response of Colonel Brandt, and seizing his hat he left the room seemingly greatly agitated.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE ACCEPTANCE.

It was with feelings of shame and pain commingled, that Colonel Brandt made up his mind to speak to Maud upon the proposal of the man whom he knew to be such a villain.

But for him there was no alternative, and he went up to her room early in the afternoon, for he knew that she would be busy late preparing for some friends who were to dine with them.

Maud sat by the window, glancing out upon the flower-garden and the scene beyond, of pleasant homes, with the grand Mississippi rolling by in the distance.

She saw that her father looked annoyed, and said in a kindly tone:

"What is it, father, that worries you?"

"You, my child."

"What have I done, father?"

"Nothing, and you are the dearest, sweetest daughter a father ever had, and far better than I deserve."

"But the truth is they wish to take you away from me."

"Who are they, father?"

"Why your beaux, of course."

"I have no beaux, father."

"Well, you have plenty of lovers, and I know two-score who would like to marry you; but one in particular is crazy about you."

"Ah, father, my love is dead, never to be resurrected any more."

"Do not speak of my marrying, but tell any man who might seek to win my fortune—"

"Your love, Maud."

"Well, call it love, if you will, that they seek; but tell them I am determined to die an old maid— What is it, Ellizette?"

"A letter for you, miss," and the quadroon maid handed a sealed note to her mistress.

Breaking the seal, Maud glanced at the contents, and her face changed color.

Twice she read it over slowly, while her father narrowly watched her the while.

"Is anything wrong, my child?" he asked.

"Oh, no, sir; it is a letter from Myrtle, and I was thinking whether I could do as she requests; but what were you saying, father, about my marrying?"

"I was saying, Maud, that there was one person who had asked me for your hand, and I promised to make known the proposal to you, and hear what you had to say."

"And who is the gentleman that does me this honor, sir?"

"Monsieur Erricson."

"Ah!"

"Yes, Maud; and I have reason to know that he is rich."

"One should look for more than riches in a husband."

"True; but he certainly is very clever, and seems to be a man calculated to make a woman happy."

"He may be, sir."

"You will consider his proposal, then?"

"Yes, sir?"

"And favorably?"

"Yes, father."

"God bless you, child; but I hardly dreamed of this," said the colonel, fervently.

"You may say to Monsieur Erricson, father, that I accept his offer of marriage; and if he will call, we will arrange a day when the ceremony can take place."

Colonel Brandt left the room, muttering:

"Well, commend me to a woman for fickleness, and especially my daughter; for one moment she was vowing to be an old maid, and promptly accepted that villain's proposal the next."

"But she shall not marry him!"

"No, no, it shall not be—it shall not be, for I will prevent it this very night," and the colonel went to his room, with an expression upon his face that boded no good to Monsieur Enrique Erricson.

CHAPTER XL.

A SCENE IN THE GARDEN.

The guests that were to dine at the Brandt Mansion arrived early, and found both Colonel Brandt and his beautiful daughter in apparently a most cheerful mood.

Irving was absent on his yacht, where he passed most of his time, in anticipation of hearing from the smuggler, he riding into town every day to see his father and sister.

As the evening wore on, Colonel Brandt excused himself for a few moments upon the plea of getting a letter off in a packet leaving the following morning, and retired to his room.

Opening a drawer he took out a pistol and a knife, and throwing a cloak about him he quietly left the house, gaining the garden unseen.

As he passed through the hall the light shone upon his face, showing that it was livid.

Swiftly he walked toward the arbor in the garden, where he had appointed to meet Monsieur Erricson at ten o'clock.

This arbor was in one end of the beautiful grounds surrounding the elegant house which the colonel had rented, and near it, in the wall, was an iron gate leading out into an unfrequented street.

Monsieur Erricson, the colonel was aware, knew the arbor well, and the way into the street, and hence he had appointed the place as a rendezvous, in his desire to have the man meet him there, little thinking how strange it seemed for him to make such an appointment with one who was suing for his daughter's hand.

"Yes, I will end my misery this night, and save my poor child the wretched life she would lead as his wife.

"It will be but a sudden, quick blow, and all will be over, and I can leave him where he falls until he is discovered.

"I have a horror of taking human life, but it must be done to save Maud and myself.

"They will think that some footpad dogged his footsteps to this place, when he was coming to visit us, and killed him for his money, so I must be careful to take his purse and jewelry.

"No, I will never be suspected, and I will be safe, for I will drive down to his hotel to-night, pretend to wait for his coming, and search his room for that paper.

"Once it is in my hands I am safe, and I'll not regret this night's deed."

So mused the colonel, as he stood in the shadow of the arbor, awaiting the coming of his victim.

Presently he saw a form approaching, and firmly grasped his knife.

But as the form approached nearer, the stars gave light sufficient for him to see that it was not the one whom he had expected to meet.

The man was smaller, and walked with a quick, firm step.

"Curses! he has sent a messenger, and I am foiled," hissed the colonel through his set teeth.

An instant more and the man halted at the entrance to the arbor, and called out:

"Colonel Brandt!"

"Yes, sir, I am here," and the colonel stepped into the starlight.

"You are here, sir, I believe, to meet Monsieur Erricson?"

"I am."

"He will not come, you may be sure, for he suspects your plot against him, and will send a messenger."

"Will send? Are you not that messenger?"

"I am not, sir."

"And what do you mean by saying that he suspects my plot against him?" sternly demanded Colonel Brandt, though he trembled violently.

"I am no man to waste words, colonel, and I mean what I say.

"You planned to meet Monsieur Erricson here and kill him; but I have come to prevent your doing so."

"Sir! you are—"

"Now keep calm, colonel, and hear me.

"I saved you last night from a villain's clutches at the Palace of Chance, and I intend to save you from yourself to-night."

"Great God! you are Palafox the Pirate, for I see now that you are the one who befriended me last night."

"Yes, I am he whom men call the Sea Fox, colonel; but, pirate though I am, I wish to be your friend, and I tell you to trust implicitly in me and I will help you out of your scrape."

"Ha! you know that I am in trouble then?"

"Yes, I know all."

"All?" gasped the remorse-haunted man.

"Yes, I am aware of the sins which your love of gambling has led you to commit, and I ask you to trust me."

"I will, by the Lord Harry, for your voice has the ring of a true man in it."

"Your daughter, I believe, is sought by this Frenchman, I may ask, now that we understand each other?"

"Yes."

"And you are forced to give your consent?"

"I am."

"And her answer?"

"She accepts his offer."

"So be it."

"Poor girl, I pity her."

"Wait until you see that she needs your pity, colonel; but now let me ask you to kindly inform me when the day is set for the marriage."

"I will; but where can I find you?"

"Address Captain Fox, at the address on this card; but see, there comes the messenger from your expectant son-in-law."

"Your eyes are better than mine, if you see any one."

"My eyes are accustomed to looking for danger; but remember, tell the messenger your daughter accepts, and ask Monsieur Erricson to breakfast with you.

"Now I must be off, but you have my address," and Captain Palafox glided away in the darkness just as Colonel Brandt caught sight of a form approaching, and muttered:

"He is right, for that is not Erricson."

Stepping out of the arbor the colonel confronted the man, who stopped short a yard away, and said:

"We meet again, Colonel Brandt?"

"Ha! you are that accursed card cheat who swindled me last night?"

"Be kind enough, colonel, not to use harsh terms, for I am the representative of Monsieur Enrique Erricson."

"Curse him! what message did he send by you to me?"

"He said that you would send either yes or no by me."

"Tell him yes, and bid him dine with me to-morrow afternoon."

"All right, colonel, and take the advice of a man who is up in the ways of the world and never play cards with a stranger."

"Begone, sir!" cried the colonel in angry tones, and he felt tempted to vent his ire upon the man before him.

But that individual at once retreated, seeming to fear just such an intention on the part of the colonel.

Having seen the messenger depart, Colonel Brandt returned to his room, put away his unused weapons, and again joined his guests in the parlor, a feeling of relief in his heart that he had not been forced to kill the man who held him in his power, and wondering at the strange interest which Palafox the Pirate had taken in him.

CHAPTER XLI.

MAUD ACTS HYSTERICALLY.

PROMPTLY at the appointed hour, Monsieur Erricson alighted from his carriage before the Brandt Mansion and was ushered by the negro butler into the parlor.

"Master will be down in a minute, sir," said the butler, and the visitor threw himself into an easy-chair and glanced about him.

Presently a step was heard descending the stairs and Colonel Brandt entered the room.

He bowed coldly, and did not take the hand extended to him, while he said:

"Monsieur, there is need of apparent friendship between us only in the presence of others."

"As you please, colonel; but as your invited guest I expected a more cordial welcome."

"You are not welcome, sir, and your holding me in your power as you do alone causes me to tolerate you."

"Well, I will not quarrel with you, colonel; but did I understand my messenger aright when he said you sent the word yes to me?"

"You did."

"Then Miss Brandt accepts my offer?"

"She does."

"I am a happy man," and the eyes of the Frenchman glittered with joy and triumph.

"And I am a wretched one, and poor Maud will live a life of wretchedness."

"Oh, no, for I love her and shall make her happy."

"But may I ask if you had to urge her acceptance of my offer upon her?"

"No."

"She required no urging?"

"Strange to say she accepted you at once."

"Then she must love me."

"Who can tell what is within a woman's heart? But she will soon be down and then you can arrange the day when you wish to marry her."

"I hope it will be soon."

"The sooner the better for me, as I wish this misery over, for I suppose you will keep your word made to me?"

"I will."

"And give me the paper you hold of mine, and cancel all debts I owe you?"

"Yes."

"Enough, for I shall be satisfied; but here comes Maud."

There was a rustle of silk along the hall, and Maud swept into the parlors.

There was not the slightest embarrassment in her manner as she advanced toward Monsieur Erricson and said in her low, soft way:

"I am glad to see you, Monsieur Erricson, and I thank you for the honor done me in the offer of your hand."

"And mademoiselle honors me by accepting?" said the man.

"Yes, monsieur."

"I feel deeply your kindness, mademoiselle, and can only prove by actions, not words, my appreciation of your extreme goodness."

Maud bowed and asked quietly:

"Does Monsieur Erricson expect me to set an early day for the marriage?"

"Ah, mademoiselle, I would be but only too happy, for I desire to extend my travels into the Northern country and so happy would I be for your sweet companionship."

"Let us say then one month from to-day."

"Is that agreeable to you, father?" asked Maud in the coolest manner imaginable.

"Yes, my child, for your appointment of a day will suit me," assured the colonel, utterly amazed at the seeming anxiety of his daughter to marry the man whom he knew to be such a consummate villain.

"And you, monsieur?"

"Your pleasure is mine, Mademoiselle Brandt," responded the accepted suitor.

Instantly dismissing the subject, Maud turned the conversation adroitly, and soon after they went to dinner.

The meal passed off pleasantly, the colonel being forced into laughter by the sallies of Maud and Monsieur Erricson, neither of whom ever appeared to better advantage.

At last the visitor took his leave and the colonel escorted him out upon the piazza.

"It is all arranged now, colonel, and I am a happy man," he said.

"And I suppose you will give me the paper you hold of mine to-morrow?"

"Oh, no, my dear colonel, for there is many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip, you know."

"Do you not intend to return that paper?"

"Oh, yes, when Miss Maud Brandt becomes Mrs. Erricson, the paper is yours, and your debts are canceled; but not before."

The colonel uttered a smothered oath, and his visitor said:

"Do not fret, for I am the one to be hurt, as to-night I would have been in my grave, had I been so silly as to have kept that appointment with you."

"What do you mean, sir?"

"Ah, colonel, your very innocence proves you to be young in crime, whatever you may be as a gambler."

"Why, your appointment of a rendezvous with me in that arbor in your garden, told me that you intended to murder me."

"Sir!"

"Don't get tragic, for I knew well your intention, so I sent another target for you to practice on, while I remained in my room."

"No, colonel, you are not an adept in such matters, for if you were, you could have readily gotten rid of me before."

"But I know your little game now, and I shall keep my eyes open and thwart you, no matter how snake-like you may strike."

"Good-night, my dear colonel, and pleasant dreams."

The man laughed lightly, sprung into his carriage, which just then drove around to the door, and departed leaving his host in no enviable frame of mind.

CHAPTER XLII.

TWO SCHOONERS SET SAIL.

THERE was certainly some mystery in the very remarkable manner in which Captain Palafox was appearing in the city of New Orleans, and happening in just in the nick of time when he was needed.

We left him in the Devil Fish, after his meeting with the Lady Maud, heading in chase of the Ghoul of the Sea, and next he turns up in New Orleans in the Palace of Chance.

To account for this the reader must be made acquainted with the fact that the Devil Fish went hotly in chase of the Ghoul of the Sea, and learned off the Balize, that a vessel answering the description of the pirate craft had gone on up the river.

Following suit, Captain Palafox had run up the United States flag, and brought to every vessel he met, and asked regarding the pirate schooner.

To his surprise no such vessel had been seen by any of those he met.

Returning to the mouth of the river, he asked again of the fishermen, who had told him they had seen the schooner pass up the stream, and one and all of them asserted that the craft had certainly gone up toward the city.

They also described the outlaw vessel in such a way that he felt that they had certainly seen the pirate.

So up the river he went, again hailing all outward bound craft, and asking about the schooner.

Several had seen various vessels going up, but none answering the description of the craft that floated the Cutlass and Cross flag.

"She has certainly gone up the river, but not in her regular rig," said Captain Palafox to his first officer.

"Doubtless, sir, and if we follow her, we had better disguise our vessel, too, for she will be recognized," answered the officer.

"Certainly, and we will run close inshore, and set to work at it."

The helmsman, in obedience to an order, ran the schooner close inshore, and the crew were set to work disguising her, until under their nimble fingers, she soon presented the appearance of an honest coaster, for her guns were sent down into the hold, where four-fifths of her crew followed them, and the schooner was metamorphosed into a brig.

Thus disguised, Captain Palafox ran his vessel on up the river and dropped anchor below the city.

He knew New Orleans well, and at once went ashore to see some of his former agents there, who had disposed of his booty for him when he was flying the free rover flag.

By inquiries, he soon learned that the Ghoul of the Sea was in town, and likely to remain for some little time.

He accordingly brought all of his men ashore

excepting sufficient to man the vessel, and quartered them at a sailors' inn.

Then, in various disguises, he set about the work he had on hand.

A natural detective, he ferreted out the fact that a plot was going on against Maud Brandt, while her father was being used as a tool to carry it out, and the reader has seen how he thwarted the villainy of the gambler Dupont, and afterward prevented Colonel Brandt from taking the life of the man who held him in his power.

After departing from the garden that night, Captain Palafox continued to follow up his plans which he had formed to save Maud from a scoundrel, and also to capture the famous Ghoul of the Sea, whom he knew to be still in the city.

The next day he called upon his daughter Myrtle at her boarding-school, and soon after Maud Brandt came in.

"You wrote for me to come and see you, Myrtle," said Maud, after she had greeted the young girl and her father.

"Yes, Miss Maud, father wrote me a note asking me to have you come here this morning," answered Myrtle, and the three then adjourned to the large garden surrounding the school, and had a long and earnest talk together.

Upon taking his leave of Myrtle and seeing Maud to her carriage, Captain Palafox got a horse and rode out to the lake shore and boarded the lugger, Irving recognizing him and sending a boat ashore after him.

For a long time the two friends—for such they were in spite of the fact that one had been a man branded as an outlaw—chatted together, and then the captain returned to the city and sought quarters at his agent's.

He found there a seaman awaiting him whose face indicated that he had something to communicate of importance.

"Well, Bolt, what is it?"

"The Sea Ghoul sails to-night, sir."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, sir."

"You are sure of this?"

"Yes, captain, for I enlisted as you told me, and orders came on board to be ready to sail to-night."

"Are the men on board?"

"Only a few, sir, the rest being quartered ashore as your men are."

"You told me, I believe, that the schooner was disguised as a lumber craft?"

"Yes, sir, she has lumber on her in such a way that she looks loaded down; but there is a good deal of mischief under her disguise, sir."

"I do not doubt it, Bolt."

"But now go down to the inn and tell the men to be ready to go on board the schooner as soon as it is dark, for I shall follow this pirate to sea and he must not be permitted to dodge us."

"No, sir, we must catch him this time," and the seaman left, while Captain Palafox sat down and wrote several letters.

One of them was addressed to:—

"CAPTAIN IRVING BRANDT,

Yacht Lady Maud."

And this was dispatched by a special messenger.

Another was directed to Myrtle, at Madam Chotard's academy, and within this he put a letter that bore the name of Maud Brandt.

Having dispatched messengers with these letters, Captain Palafox set to work making his preparations to depart that night.

As soon as it was dark he went down on board his vessel, and the crew at once began to get ready for sailing.

Soon after a large, heavily-laden schooner passed the disguised Devil Fish going down the river, and Captain Palafox, who stood watching her, muttered:

"There goes the craft I am after."

"Now, as soon as my men come on board, I will follow in his wake, and then it shall be a combat to the death."

Soon after a boat came alongside filled with men.

Silently they boarded the disguised vessel and went to their respective posts.

Then a second boat arrived, and a third followed shortly after.

As the men from the last boat reached the deck, the anchor was raised, the sails were set, and the Devil Fish sped down the Mississippi, her crew hard at work, changing her peaceful air into one that smacked of a fighting craft.

Upon reaching the Gulf, there, not a mile ahead, was sighted the Ghoul of the Sea, and instantly all eyes were turned upon her, while Captain Palafox cried in trumpet tones:

"Lads, there is the game we have to run down and worry to death."

"Let every man do his duty!"

The cheer that his crew gave was heard on board the other vessel, and it told those on her decks that a merciless foe was upon their track.

Instantly sail was set upon her, the crew went to quarters, and before a fair breeze the two beautiful schooners began to fly over the waters in a hot chase.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE FLIGHT AND FIGHT.

"I AM surprised that the famous Ghoul of the Sea, should fly from me," said Captain Palafox, as he stood upon his vessel's deck watching the schooner ahead, as she crowded on in rapid flight.

"You expected him to fight you?" inquiringly remarked one of the officers of the Devil Fish.

"As a matter of course, for he has borne the reputation of a very brave man."

"And his schooner is larger than the Devil Fish, sir," said the officer.

"Not only larger, Conrad, but she carries heavier metal, and two guns more than we do, while his crew outnumbers mine by a score of men, as I found out just before we sailed."

"Yet he is flying, Captain Palafox."

"Yes, and I shall fight him, for we are gaining upon him."

"Yes, sir, we have gained steadily."

"He will open on us soon, to try and disable us, and if he does not do so, then we will overhaul and board him."

"It will be a hard fight, for he is a desperate man, they say, and has a wicked crew."

"Then we must fight the harder, Conrad, for this is to be a fight to the death."

"Run up the United States flag, and see if he will set his colors."

This order was obeyed, the Stars and Stripes fluttering up to the peak.

But the Ghoul of the Sea paid no attention to it.

"Try the Spanish flag, Conrad."

This order was also promptly obeyed, and disregarded by the flying schooner as before.

"Haul down that flag, Conrad, and I'll try another, which I had never expected to raise on this vessel again."

"You mean our rover's flag?"

"Yes."

Out of its hiding-place was brought a roll of black bunting, and when it unfolded at the peak it displayed a sable field, in the center of which was a red fox standing with one foot upon a white skull.

The crew of the Devil Fish glanced ominously at the hideous flag, and then bent their eyes upon their foe.

Almost immediately up to the peak of the Ghoul of the Sea went his huge Cutlass and Cross flag.

"Down with the fox, Conrad, and up with the Stars and Stripes again, for that tells just who he is."

"At the guns there forward!"

"Ay, ay, sir."

"Send a shot into yonder craft!"

"Ay, ay, sir," and the instant after the pivot-gun on the fore-castle roared forth its note of defiance, the signal for the battle to begin.

Those on board the Ghoul of the Sea seemed to be surprised at the action of their pursuer, having evidently expected to find only a rival rover in the Devil Fish, after she hoisted the sable flag and the red fox.

But the shot tearing along her decks awoke all on board to busy action, and the fact that they had a foe to meet.

Quickly the stern guns of the Ghoul of the Sea replied to her enemy, and then began a running fight, the roar of the cannon being incessant.

It was a grand, but terrible sight, to see those two beautiful vessels flying over the waters and pouring upon each other an iron hail, which hit hard and destroyed life.

With about equal damage sustained, the two vessels kept up their running combat for half an hour, when the Devil Fish suddenly luffed sharp, and poured a broadside upon her foe.

It was a disastrous act for her enemy, as it cut away his bow-sprit, his foretopmast, and dismounted a gun, besides killing and wounding half a score of the crew.

"That was well done, and puts us on a more equal footing," cried Captain Palafox, and a moment after, as the Devil Fish bore down upon her adversary, came the thrilling cry:

"Boarders, ahoy!"

Then the Devil Fish swept up alongside of the Ghoul of the Sea, both vessels firing rapidly from their guns the while, and next followed a crash, the throwing of grappling-irons, and yells infernal mingling with the ring of steel and rattle of small-arms, as Captain Palafox led his brave men upon the deck of the craft he had run down.

Hot and fierce was the combat for a while; but then the Ghoul of the Sea seemed to become demoralized, and cries of quarter came from all sides.

"Spare them, lads, when they ask it," shouted Captain Palafox, and at once the conflict ceased.

"Where is your captain—the Pirate Priest, Ghoul of the Sea—or whatever you may call him?" asked Captain Palafox of an officer.

"Our chief is not on board, sir; but there is the first luff, and he commands, though he has got a bad wound," and the officer pointed to a man lying wounded near the cabin companion-way.

"Why it is you, sir, whom I met the other night cheating a gentleman at cards."

"Your punishment has come quickly," said Captain Palafox, as he bent over the wounded man, who was none other than Dupont the gambler and tool of Monsieur Erricson.

"Yes, I am dying, and slain by one who sails also as a free rover," said Dupont faintly.

"You are mistaken, sir, for what I was in the past, I am not now."

"But where is your chief?"

"In the city."

"Ah, then back to the city I go," and with his well-earned prize Captain Palafox headed back for the Balize, his crew looking after the dead and wounded, and repairing damages as they sailed along.

CHAPTER XLIV.

IRVING BRANDT AT WORK.

THE very day of the combat between the Devil Fish and the Ghoul of the Sea's schooner, Irving Brandt was surprised most agreeably by a visit from the smuggler traitor.

The man came out to the yacht in a boat alone, and asked to see the young captain.

"He in de cabin, sah, just walk in," said Wood.

Irving arose as the man entered, and said:

"Well, I am glad to see you, and I hope you bring good news?"

"I guess you begun to think I had played you false, not hearing from me, sir?"

"No, I believed you knew what was best for your own interest."

"Well, what have you to communicate?"

"The Owls are going to the retreat in a few days."

"When?"

"Three nights from this they will run in."

"All of them?"

"Yes, thirteen."

"And their captain?"

"The Sea Owl?"

"Yes."

"Will be there?"

"Have they the same vessel?"

"Yes, and one more."

"Ah!"

"They cut out a trim little craft from Pensacola."

"And their cargoes?"

"They have received the goods from two of the vessels, and the third had to go up first to Mobile and unload."

"And then?"

"The lads will bring the booty down in a fishing smack and meet the smuggler lugger three nights hence."

"And you are to act as my pilot?"

"If you have the force to take the lads, and I get my money."

"You shall have your money, and I will have men enough to take the band."

"When shall I start?"

"To-night."

"Then I will leave you here, while I go to the city and order aboard a crew I have already shipped, and they are good men too."

"How many are there?"

"Twenty-five."

"It is scant."

"No, for I have my slaves on board with me, seven in number, and the surprise we give them will be equally in our favor."

"I guess you are right; but I don't want a failure, or my neck will be stretched."

"You need not fear, my man; but now I must be off to the city."

And to the city Irving went in all haste, and, going to the navy quarters, where he had already asked for the crew, he reported to the commander that he needed the men, and as soon as it was dark they were dispatched to the yacht with two midshipmen, to be under his orders.

Before midnight all were on board, and the Lady Maud spread her sails and glided down the lake.

The next night she ran into a secret harbor on the coast, under the pilotage of the smuggler, and was to there lie in wait for the running in of the outlaw craft.

A watch was kept by the smuggler upon the banks of the bayou, leading up to the inner basin, or inlet, and at a late hour the man boarded the yacht with the information that two small vessels had gone up the stream.

"You are sure they are the smugglers?" asked Irving.

"Yes, sir, for they are the sloop they cut out and the old lugger."

"Then we had better start at once."

"Better get the men in the boats and have all ready, captain; but we don't wish to hit there until just about dawn, when all will be sound asleep, for they don't keep a watch in this wild place."

Irving ordered the men into the boats, of which there were three.

He left the yacht wholly deserted, and took his negro crew and five men in his boat.

The other two boats contained ten men each and were commanded by the two middies, who felt elated at a chance to distinguish themselves.

The oars were then muffled, and canvas tied upon the blades so that the dip and rise would make no splash, and with the smuggler pilot in the boat with Irving, the party started upon their dangerous work.

It was a slow pull up the bayou, and dawn was near at hand when they reached the basin.

There in the center lay at anchor half a dozen small vessels and boats.

Three of the craft were nearly the same size, and the smuggler explained that one of them was the floating home of Captain Restel, the Sea Owl, and the others were the cruisers belonging to the band.

The rest of the boats were merely skiffs and a sail-boat.

"Then let a boat board each of these three larger vessels, and if you find no one on them, at once come to the assistance of the others," ordered Irving.

"Is all in readiness?" he asked.

"Ay, ay, sir."

"Then give way, lads!"

Out of the shadows into the basin darted the boats, and after a short pull they were alongside of their respective goals.

Out of the cabins rushed the smugglers, as over the sides clambered the attacking party, and then the fight became most savage.

But Irving and his men were determined upon victory, and in a few minutes the fight had ended, for half of the smugglers were either dead or wounded, and the remainder were glad to cry for mercy.

Among the slain was Captain Restel, who fell beneath a cutlass stroke dealt him by Irving, whom he wounded slightly.

Banding over the body of the Sea Owl was a slender form, and the increasing light showed it to be Rita, the smuggler's daughter and pirate's wife.

As Irving approached her to beg her to enter the cabin, she turned and sprung upon him with the fury of a tigress, a knife in her hand.

In an instant it would have been driven into the breast of the brave youth, whose right arm hung wounded by his side, when his faithful mate, Wood, threw himself forward and caught the murderous weapon in his broad shoulder.

Then, before she could withdraw the blade he seized her and held her in a grip she could not shake off.

"Foiled now am I by that black fiend."

"But, boy, I will some day have your life," cried the infuriated woman, as she was seized by two seamen and borne into the cabin.

"My poor Wood, you got the blow intended for me," said Irving, grasping the hand of the faithful negro.

"It hain't much, massa, for my skin am awful thick; but she meant it wicked, didn't she, sah?"

"She did indeed; but now we will look after the wounded and then set sail with our captured fleet for New Orleans," and though wounded, Irving turned to attend to the duties devolving upon him.

CHAPTER XLV.

AT LAST.

THE city of New Orleans was in a ferment of excitement over two important happenings, and it was no wonder that there was cause for rejoicing as the famous pirate vessel known as the Ghoul of the Sea had been captured, and then lay at the navy quarters with her crew on board in irons.

The other event to cause excitement was the sailing up the river a few days after the capture of the pirate schooner, of the Lady Maud, conveying a fleet of smaller vessels that had been flying outlaw colors under the prince of smugglers known as the Sea Owl.

The chief smuggler had been slain and his crew and booty had been brought on the Lady Maud, which had sailed with her little fleet around by the Balize and up the river to the city.

Delivering his prisoners and the smuggler vessels to the commander, Irving left the Lady Maud, accompanied by a woman closely veiled, and upon reaching the shore he said to her:

"Now, madam, you are free to go your way, for I will not surrender you as a prisoner, but, with your smuggler father dead, and pirate husband soon to be hanged, yours indeed will be a sad lot."

"I will go my way, Irving Brandt; but I will not forget that you killed my father, and some day you and I shall meet again."

"I row it!"

With this she entered a carriage, which Irving had ordered for her, and drove away, while he departed for his home, to make known his gallant capture to his father and sister.

Two days after, while the town was ringing with praise of Irving Brandt, the young hero, a small party were gathered in the parlors of the Brandt Mansion.

These consisted of Colonel Brandt, Maud, Myrtle, and Irving.

That they were expecting a visitor was evident, for they were anxiously looking out toward the gateway leading into the grounds.

Soon a carriage rolled in and a gentleman sprung out and was ushered into the parlor.

It was Monsieur Enrique Erricson.

He was dressed in the height of fashion, looked very handsome, yet seemed a trifle pale.

"Monsieur, in our joy, my daughter sent for you and I am glad you have come, for I have some friends here to meet you," said Colonel Brandt, pleasantly.

"I shall be glad to meet any of Colonel Brandt's friends," was the smiling reply, and Monsieur Erricson glanced around as though expecting to meet strangers, and then said:

"Ah, they have not arrived yet, for I see here only familiar faces."

"Yes, monsieur, they are here."

"Walk in, gentlemen!"

The last words Colonel Brandt uttered in a loud voice, and into the parlor strode an officer and four seamen in uniform, while the former cried sternly, as he leveled a pistol at the Frenchman:

"Barton Keys, you are my prisoner!"

As white as marble the pretended Frenchman staggered backward, his hand to his breast-pocket.

But before he could draw a weapon with his unnerved fingers his foes sprung upon him, irons were clasped upon his wrists, and he stood at their mercy a helpless prisoner, while he gasped, as he fixed his eyes upon the officer:

"I owe this to you, Palafox, the Pirate!"

"Yes, you owe it to me, but I am no pirate, Barton Keys, for I repented of my sins, offered my services to the Government to hunt down smugglers and pirates, and the work I have done gained me a pardon for myself and crew."

"Hold, hear me, and know that the man whom you inveigled with letters into a trap, was rescued by this brave boy, Irving Brandt, who also set your wife free to go her way, though she threatened some day that he should die by her hand."

"That man whom you so cruelly wronged is here to face you, to tell how you wrote a letter to him threatening death to Maud Brandt if he did not turn pirate, and how you entrapped him on board the smuggler craft and kept him in irons all this long time, while you took his name and dishonored it before the world."

"Stand forth, Bradford Carr, and face this fiend who has so wronged you!"

Into the room then came Bradford Carr, pale, thin, haggard, almost a wreck of his former self; but the old fire was in his eyes, and he smiled as Maud Brandt stepped to his side.

"You see your work, sir; but he will soon be himself again, and marry the maiden you sinned so to win."

"And there, Barton Keys, is another victim you sought to destroy," and Captain Palafox pointed to Colonel Brandt.

"But I was fortunate enough to save him; and finding you out in your disguise as Monsieur Enrique Erricson, I took a room next to yours at the hotel and heard all I needed to condemn you, and, with the aid of Miss Brandt and her brave brother, to whom I told my secret, I have run you under the shadow of the gallows, and driven from the seas the flag that bears the Cutlass and Cross."

CHAPTER XLVI.

CONCLUSION.

Now that the reader is aware that Bradford Carr was a victim of cruel wrong, and not the Ghoul of the Sea, as Barton Keys led the world to believe, there is little more to tell in these pages.

With the Sea Owls broken up, and the Ghoul of the Sea run down, Colonel Brandt had nothing to fear in living at his plantation home, and back to Brandt Manor he went with his family, which had been added to, for Bradford Carr and Maud were made man and wife before leaving New Orleans; and as Captain Palafox had accepted work under the Government, his beautiful daughter, Myrtle, went with the friends who had become so dear to her.

Shortly after their return, Irving Brandt received a midshipman's warrant in the United States, and left home to report for duty, and which duty was of such an adventurous nature that it forms a theme of another romance.

As to Colonel Brandt the lessons he had received, seemed to give him strength to keep his pledge to gamble no more, and as months went by and he remained at home, Maud held hope that he would never again touch a card.

Bradford Carr, a ter the danger and suffering he had known, was content to settle down at home, and take the care of the estates off the colonel's shoulders, while he devoted many a leisure hour to teaching Myrtle, who was budding forth into beautiful womanhood.

And, with happiness reigning upon Brandt Hall and its inmates, I will let fall the curtain, my kind reader, upon my romance of the black flag that bore the emblem of the Cutlass and Cross.

"The Sea Owl" to follow. A companion story to "The Pirate Priest" and "Cutlass and Cross."

THE END.

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